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MARY PECHELL

BY

MRS. BELLOC LOWNDES

AUTHOR OF "JANE OGLANDER," "THE CHINK IN THE ARMOUR," ETC.

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1912

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CHAPTER I

John Ryman was sitting in a first-class smoking-carriage in the evening Sussex express, a train which only ran during the summer months of each year, and which was so timed as to make it impossible for those travelling by it to have their dinner at what John Ryman and his like then considered the right hour—eight o'clock.

Perhaps that was why he shared the carriage with only one other man. Ryman was not gregarious. His dark, intelligent, determined-looking face had perhaps told the other as much, for during the long two hours they had already been together they had not exchanged a word.

Ryman had nearly come to his destination, and he was glad of it, for on the whole it had been a disagreeable journey, one filled with two distinct sensations which were new to him—disappointment, and a measure of suspense.

He had hoped to arrive this time at Halkham House, the place he secretly called "home," as owner of a neighbouring property which he had taken great pains to acquire, and on the possession of which he had early fixed his heart. Indeed, he could never remember the time when he had not wished to own the noble ruin rising from the stretch of wild down and woodland called Highways.

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There was one consolation. He had told no one of his intended purchase.

As to the other untoward feeling, that of suspense, it concerned what should be, to any thoughtful and self-respectful human being, and John Ryman possessed both these qualities, the most important matter in the world—his marriage.

Ryman was taking this journey into Sussex in order to make an offer of marriage to a girl with whom circumstances had thrown him into close, and from his point of view rather unconventional, contact from time to time during the last two years.

To his surprise and uneasy discomfiture, he had come to feel he could not go on living without her. When he went about his business—and he was a very busy man—he found he was always thinking of her. Twice, late at night, when he had nothing better to do—a most unusual condition for him—he had actually gone and walked up and down the quiet street where she lived with a young cousin—an arrangement, by the way, of which John Ryman disapproved, though it was owing to that arrangement, and to the absence of an efficient chaperon, he had been able to see her as often and as freely as he had done.

Considering how certain he was of his own feelings, it was odd and irritating not to know how far they were reciprocated—not that he would have wished the future Mrs. John Ryman to be forthcoming, even to him. But it was strange to reflect—and John Ryman had reflected on the matter inconveniently often for his own comfort during the last few days—that Mary Pechell had given no indication of her feelings. Sometimes he reasoned him-

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self into supposing that the possibility of his making her an offer had not crossed her mind. He had been very discreet in his wooing.

Well, it was no use thinking about it now. He would know to-morrow exactly where he stood. With a restless movement he turned and stared out of the window at the twilit landscape flashing past. Every one of the sixty miles was familiar to him. He knew every house, every field, almost every tree along the line between London and Cleeping station.

He had been only five years old when he first took this journey, having come South from the North of England with his mother and a prim, determined nurse.

Later, at frequent intervals during his boyhood, he had spent his holidays with his good-natured uncle John Baliol, and his clever, uncertain-tempered aunt, Lady Susan. And now that he was grown up and had become his own master, he still came here often, though the kind uncle, his mother's brother, was dead. Now he came in answer to invitations, not always graciously tendered him, by his uncle's widow.

Through his mother, John Ryman was descended from a long line of Sussex squires, and he loved with a strong racial instinct the southern county, while he had no liking for the north, from which he derived most of his own salient qualities, and where the Rymans had long pursued the honourable business avocations which had made them rich.

His mind swung back to Highways. He bitterly regretted that the little estate on which he had set his heart had slipped out of his hands; but he did not regret, as some men in his place would by now have done, that he had not gone up to the price which the place had fetched.

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Highways Castle had changed hands by private tender, and at a price which John Ryman considered to be fully three thousand pounds more than it was worth, and fifteen hundred pounds more than he himself had felt justified in offering for it.

Ryman was not a man who allowed himself to dwell overmuch on the future, but he was aware that in all probability Lady Susan, herself childless, would make him her heir—in fact he was the natural heir to Halkham, as being its late owner's only nephew. But it was Lady Susan's money which had cleared the place of the mortgages which must in the end have driven easy-going John Baliol from his home, and she was absolutely free to do what she liked with the noble old house and great park, to say nothing of the village over which she held despotic sway. Still, were she not to leave him the property, Lady Susan would be doing something which the neighbourhood, at any rate, would think very odd and unfair. Unluckily, she was even now quite indifferent to public opinion, and little would she reck what was thought of her later on, when she lay by John Baliol's side in Halkham Church.

It was because of this uncertainty, as well as with a view to his probable marriage, that Ryman had determined to buy Highways Castle. The castle was a ruin, a splendid shell, of which the interior had been destroyed by fire some eighty years ago; but there was a house of a sort, a picturesque, curious old farm, some two hundred yards below the ruins, and he had heard it warmly praised by the young lady who he intended should become his wife.

The train was now within two stations of Cleeping. John Ryman took the pipe from his mouth and knocked

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the ashes out against the open window. At the same moment the man sitting opposite him threw out the stump of the cigar he had been smoking.

For an instant the eyes of the two met; then the stranger bent his head again over some kind of architectural plan or design which he had been studying, altering, and annotating during the greater part of their joint journey. He was a big, fair, well-built man, dressed with a thought more care and research than is usual with an Englishman of the type to which he evidently belonged, for both he and John Ryman were of what the French so happily call the easy class—both, that is, looked as if they had not a money care in the world.

And neither had they. John Ryman, with an inward smile, decided his fellow-traveller to be rather ostentatious with his wealth. He had not failed to notice the man's crocodile-skin bag on the seat beside him—a bag of the kind which leads the observer to speculate idly on the sum which it must have cost.

John Ryman was a man of business. He knew to the full the value of money, and for a moment his eyes rested with some interest on the other's bent head. What a fine fair mane of hair the fellow had, and what an unusually broad, well-shaped head! It struck him with a feeling of surprise that his fellow-traveller was exceptionally handsome, and this was odd, for Ryman was not one to take note of such things as a rule. He had a cold, rather phlegmatic temperament, but he was observant. He now told himself that his fellow-traveller was almost certainly a colonial who had "made his pile" and come home to spend it.

The train was at last slowing down into Dilchester Junc-

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tion. Both men turning simultaneously, noted the twinkling lights of the Cathedral town which marked the last stage but one before Cleeping.

If Lady Susan Baliol had been the kind of aunt most women in her position would have been to so dutiful and satisfactory a nephew as was John Ryman, she would have sent her old-fashioned brougham to Dilchester, for Dilchester by road is only two miles farther from Halkham than Cleeping. But the young man knew that such a notion would never enter Lady Susan's head, and he on his side would never have suggested it, though the long tiresome wait at Dilchester—from seven to ten minutes—always irritated him.

John Ryman knew a great deal about the practical side of railway management, and he always told himself, during that weary wait at Dilchester, that a very little "speeding up" would enable the holiday crowd bound for the popular little watering-place of Ditch Haven to empty itself from the express in half the time it now took over the business.

As the train drew up into the station and there began the eager bustle and the murmur of voices which accompanied the emptying of second- and third-class carriages, Ryman leant back. How stupidly the southern lines managed their business, to be sure! It was far too late in the evening to run a holiday train in connexion with the express. He shut his eyes for a moment, for the lamps had just been lighted; and then, perhaps because his eyes were shut, he overheard a quick fragment of dialogue. The two women who were speaking were close to the open window of the first-class carriage.

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"Wasn't your husband a curate here once?"

"Yes; St. George's, Dilchester, was Arthur's first curacy."

Then the other voice, in quite an altered, urgent tone, whispered:

"Look here, Jenny, this child's really ill. He's not fit to go on to-night. Hadn't we better stop here till the morning? There's probably a decent station hotel. You remember what the doctor said about his getting overtired?"

"You know quite well I can't do that! It's as much as I've been able to manage to get them this week by the sea. I haven't a penny—not a single penny to spare, and I know you haven't!"

There was an edge of sharp pain and angry decision in the low, refined voice.

A shrill, whistling scream came from the engine. John Ryman opened his eyes. Thank God, the express was off at last! This odious stop at Dilchester had evidently been made shorter.

But the train remained standing in the station. That whistling scream had meant nothing. It was simply an outrage on the passengers' nerves. Ryman turned and looked out of the window to his right.

A newly-lit gas-jet beat down on a forlorn group, the two women whose quick interchange of words he had overheard and four children dressed in mourning of sorts. One of the children, a boy of about nine or ten years, was leaning up against a still young-looking woman in widow's weeds.

John Ryman felt vaguely uncomfortable. Within his

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means he was a charitable man; he subscribed far more largely than do most men of his age to certain charities which he had reason to suppose were thoroughly well conducted. This was the sort of case one would so like to help if one only knew how—but of course it was out of the question. The poor woman was evidently a lady, but how stupid of her to take a sick child this long journey on so hot a night! What a pity she hadn't started in the morning and reached Ditch Haven before lunch time.

And then something very odd happened.

Ryman's fellow-traveller, the man now sitting opposite to him, took a cigar-case out of his coat pocket, and from a flap in the case he extracted a bank-note. Ryman could not help seeing through his half-closed eyes that it was a ten-pound note. Then the man rose, turned the handle of the door, and jumped down on to the platform.

Ryman cautiously turned his head to the window and stared eagerly through the glass. He really couldn't help it.

The tall, fair man took a step forward. Now he was towering above the melancholy group. He put out his hand, the hand holding the note, and took the widowed woman's fingers in his grasp. The words he said reached Ryman distinctly though they were uttered in a very low tone:

"I hope you will forgive me for asking you to accept this. Though we never met, I can claim kinship with your husband—with, with Arthur."

"With Arthur?" There came a wondering thrill in the poor woman's voice. She looked down at what he had put into her hand, and though she was restrained, quiet

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in manner, her lips quivered— "Oh! no, I—I can't take this——"

"Of course you must! It's not for you—it's for the children. There's an excellent station hotel here: you must all have a quiet night there before you go on to Ditch Haven."

Before she had time to answer he was calling imperatively to a porter, "Here! Take this lady's luggage over to the station hotel"; and Ryman saw him fumbling for a shilling, which he put in the man's hand.

"It's all settled, and you mustn't be offended—I'm sure Arthur would have done as much for me—for—for my children if the case had been reversed." He spoke with an awkward attempt at light joviality. "Good-bye and good luck!"

He got back into the carriage and quietly shut the door, sat down, and in a moment was again absorbed in the plan he had been studying before they came into the Dilchester station.

And a moment later they were off—really off!

Ryman stared across at his fellow-traveller. What an extraordinary man and—and how quick, how ready-witted, and, yes—how kind! Ryman was not apt to be interested in strangers, but he felt as if he would like to know a little more about this very eccentric individual. What an amazing coincidence—that these two people, who had never before met, and yet who were related, should come together in this fashion. The only thing which could have put the man on the track was the fact that "Arthur" had held his first curacy at Dilchester—yes, that was the only clue. And what a queer bit of luck

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for the poor woman, and how stupid of her not to ask the name and address of Arthur's generous kinsman!

Ryman's wits were not quick, but they were sure, and as he turned the incident over in his mind something very like the truth dawned upon him. Most probably there was no relationship with Arthur at all; it had been claimed because in no other way could this poor widow have been induced to accept a gift from a total stranger.

Yes, that was evidently the whole story; but, mingled with John Ryman's admiration of the neatness and promptitude with which the little act of charity had been effected, there ran a feeling of regret, almost of envy. He knew that he himself could not have done it so well—nay, could not have done it at all. He would have bungled it; he would have failed to persuade the lady to accept any help.

Neither Ryman nor his fellow-traveller ever saw "Arthur's" widow again, but the incident, which threw such a flood of light on the other man's character and capacity, never wholly faded from Ryman's memory.

The few minutes spent between Dilchester and Cleeping Junction sped by far quicker than usual. The train was slowing down. Ryman got up and took his modest portmanteau—for he was only going to spend three days away from town—off the rack. And then, to his surprise, the other man got up too. He opened his huge crocodile-skin bag and pushed into it the papers and plan at which he had been looking.

Ryman gazed at him with renewed and far more intense attention than before. Who on earth could the fellow be? He knew every one, or so he believed, who ever got out

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of the London train at Cleeping, for the tiny wayside station only served some three or four little villages perched on the broad flank of Halkham Downs.

It was clear the stranger was on his way to spend a week-end in one of the country houses in each of which he, Ryman, was at home as a man is always at home in a neighbourhood where he has been a familiar figure from childhood upwards. Ryman wondered at whose house the other was going to stay. He really felt curious about it after that revealing episode of the ten-pound note.

The railway carriage door was opened by a man-servant, who carefully took out the large bag. As he was doing so John Ryman saw embossed on it in brown letters the initials "R. C." A disagreeable suspicion crossed his mind. The man who had outbid him in the matter of the purchase of Highways was named Richard Caryll.

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CHAPTER II

Lady Susan Baliol moved restlessly in her low, overroomy chair. She had already dined, and John Ryman was now having his dinner. As always, she had arranged exactly what was to follow her nephew's arrival. He was not to come in and see her till after his meal, and she desired, as it was late, that he would not dress. But though he had scrupulously carried out her wishes, she felt the time of waiting very long.

She was a short, plain old woman, and there were curious sandy streaks in her white hair. But if lacking the beauty and dignity of appearance so often found in the aged, she yet produced an impression of vigorous power denied to many only half her age, and she was happy in a strong sense of humour. Again, though her high black evening-dress was ugly, as only a dress can be of which all the details belong to a recent, if already half-forgotten, manifestation of fashion, no one could have mistaken her as being anything but the mistress of the beautiful room in which she found herself.

The boudoir in which the owner of Halkham House was awaiting John Ryman was a high, square room, forming the base of the square tower which was by far the oldest part of the house. A hundred years ago the fine London widow whom the John Baliol of that day had taken to wife had adopted this room for her own, and by her orders the oak panelling had been painted white.

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White mellowed to the deepest cream tint it had remained, though of late years more than one daring visitor had suggested to Lady Susan the advisability of restoring the room to its ancient condition. The walls were thickly covered by miniatures, faded water-colours—in her day Lady Susan had been a very fair artist—and pictures worked in silk and worsted.

At last there came the sound of quick, firm footsteps echoing in the short passage which separated the boudoir from the hall, beyond which lay the octagon dining-room. The vigorous old lady sat up, her restlessness stilled.

Lady Susan never felt wholly at ease, never in the same sense as usual mistress of her house, when John Ryman was there. For he was her heir, although not her acknowledged heir. She held the absolute right of disposal over the old Baliol estates which her fortune had rescued from her husband's and her father-in-law's creditors, but she knew, deep in her heart, that John Ryman would in time reign as lord of all that had become so dear to her; and the knowledge irked her, and irritated her as far as anything was able to irritate so philosophical and shrewd a human being as Lady Susan Baliol had become in the course of years.

Ryman opened the high white door and came in.

"Well?" she said. "Well, John? It seems a long time since we met. I suppose you went abroad for business rather than pleasure? I suppose you've come to feel that there can be no pleasure unless there's business too, eh?"

"I think that's rather unfair, Aunt Susan!" He was not afraid of her, though he also never felt entirely at ease in her presence. "I did enjoy my weeks in Spain

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very much, though from the business point of view my journey there was barren—quite barren. Their railways are the worst in Europe, and they have no wish to make them any better."

"I can't help thinking that's a good thing. Railways have spoilt England," said Lady Susan quickly. "Spain seems to be the only close time in Europe left to artists——"

Ryman stared at her. What odd things Lady Susan sometimes said!

"But do sit down, John. It fidgets me to see you standing there! Now that you are here I hope you'll stay longer than Monday—we can offer you some amusement. Mrs. Segrave has made up her mind that her dear girls have just as good, or as bad, a chance of matrimony here as in London, and so she's given up town this year."

John Ryman remained silent. He disliked Mrs. Segrave as much as it was in him to dislike anybody. He was uncomfortably aware that at one time she had thought him attracted by the youngest of her three daughters.

"They are giving a party on Tuesday," went on Lady Susan. (Ryman made up his mind that he would leave Halkham on Monday night.) Then, "I suppose you know that Mary Pechell is at the Little House?" She gave her nephew a swift, probing look.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I knew that, for I called on her yesterday, and heard she was here."

"Not *here*," observed Lady Susan perversely. "I asked her to come here, but she thought she ought to go to the Little House this time. She's got a queer fondness for her aunts——"

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"Surely that's natural enough"; but Ryman was not thinking of what he was saying; he was congratulating himself on the fact that Mary Pechell was not at Halkham House. He could not have accomplished his purpose under Lady Susan's roof. Not but what Lady Susan would be pleased—pleased, and he flattered himself, very much surprised.

"Natural? For a clever, large-minded girl to be fond of two such women as Alice and Rose Charnwood is most unnatural!" cried Lady Susan briskly. "Alice Charnwood is an odious type of your self-satisfied Englishwoman, managing, interfering— As for Rose!"

"I won't let you abuse Miss Rose," he said a little quietly, "she's always been my favourite——"

"Rose will have to be put under care if anything happens to Alice!" interrupted Lady Susan harshly. Then—"Why, it never struck me before, but I suppose if anything happened to Alice, Rose would go and live with Mary."

"Surely that would not be necessary," said John Ryman mildly. But all the time he was telling himself that it was a pity so clever a woman as Lady Susan should have nothing better to think about than the gossip of a little country village.

This discussion of the Misses Charnwood was actively distasteful to the young man. He already regarded himself as standing in a very near relation to the maiden sisters who themselves stood in an almost maternal relation to the girl he wished to make his wife. For himself he liked Miss Rose—pretty, gentle, emotional Miss Rose—far the better of the two. Like most of those who were

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acquainted with the Misses Charnwood, he respected Miss Alice and he was attached to Miss Rose.

"I wish you would tell me, Aunt Susan, what sort of a man is this Richard Caryll who's bought Highways."

John Ryman looked straight at the old lady as he spoke, and she looked back, rather sharply, at him.

"Let me see—" she said, "what sort of a man? I don't quite know what you mean by what sort of a man! I think I've already told you—at least I think I wrote to you—that I like Richard Caryll. He and I have become friends. In fact, I like him better than any new man I've seen for a very long time."

And John Ryman wondered in his turn what Lady Susan exactly meant by "new."

"That's to his credit," he said quietly; "but I should like to know why you like him."

"Let me see," she said again, "how I can best answer you, John? I like Richard Caryll, first, because he is good-looking; secondly, because he seems to be intelligent and cultivated; and, thirdly, and best reason of all, John, because I *do* like him. I admire his spirit in coming to a quiet place like this, and I also admire him"—she now fixed her light yet bright eyes on her nephew with a satirical expression—"for having cared more for what he wanted than for a few paltry hundred pounds. I suppose you know that his mysterious rival, the mysterious other bidder for the place, boggled over the price—not that it would have made the slightest difference in the long run! Mr. Caryll tells me he would have gone up to any price."

"Indeed! He must be a singular man as well as a very rich one."

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"Of course he's a singular man! That's another reason why I like him, John. Most people are so extraordinarily ordinary."

"But what made him so keen about Highways?" asked Ryman slowly. "Did he come originally from this neighbourhood? He's an Australian, isn't he?"

Lady Susan hesitated.

One of the many strange problems that this strange world offers to the thinking mind is why words sometimes play so much greater a part in human lives than actions are apt to do. The average student of human nature would have said that this particular woman was absolutely trustworthy. But Lady Susan, like most clever people, always thought she knew best. In other words, she had an absolute belief in her own judgment.

And now she judged it in her new friend, Richard Caryll's interest, to break a promise she had made to him. "He could not mean such a fact to remain secret from the man who must be my heir and future owner of Halkham" —such was her wordless thought, and so, speaking with deliberation and significance, she answered her nephew:

"The truth as to Richard Caryll is very curious, and to me very interesting, John. He is the grandson, in fact the only descendant, of the last Lord Wolferstan. I wonder you didn't realise that—you who know so much of Sussex pedigrees."

John Ryman allowed himself to show great surprise and, yes, great interest.

"Why, of course!" he exclaimed. "Yes, how stupid of me not to notice the name. Of course I have always known the story. Uncle Baliol told it me years ago——"

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"Not at all the story I should tell a boy," said Lady Susan. "However, I think you ought to know why Richard Caryll bought the poor dear old ruins and also why he doesn't boast about the reason. In fact I promised to keep the fact to myself. You will oblige me, John, by treating it as my secret."

"I wonder why he told you, Aunt Susan?"

"I guessed," she said shortly. "You see, when I first came here forty-seven years ago the story wasn't an old story. It was still the standing gossip-dish of the neighbourhood."

"I suppose he calls cousins with us?"

"Well, I suppose he is, in a sense, distantly related to you through your mother," she said, looking across at his dark, narrow face. "I don't know that I should exactly acknowledge the relationship, but I believe somewhere in the fifteenth century there *was* a marriage."

"There certainly was," he said solemnly. "The Baliol of that day married a Lady Elizabeth Caryll. I can show you the exact entry in the pedigree which hangs up in the morning-room."

"You needn't trouble to do that, John—I'll take your word for it! I like Richard Caryll quite apart from his mythical relationship with your family."

"There's nothing mythical about it, Aunt Susan." (How odd Lady Susan was, and—and how rude!) "But of course he has no kind of *right* to claim relationship. For the matter of that, I suppose he has no right to the name of Caryll. By the way, how about himself? Was *he* legitimate?"

"Good gracious, yes! His mother was a charming

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creature: very gentle and sweet-natured. Your grandmother often spoke of her, but when the crash came they disappeared—utterly. But you are right about the name. They were *not* called Caryll. Lord Wolferstan's relatives—he had plenty of relatives on his mother's side—objected."

"And what sort of a life has this man led? How did he make his money?"

"In some colony or other—but he's not given to talking much about himself."

"How does he spend his time?" asked John Ryman in a dissatisfied tone. "There seems to me so very little for a man to do in a place of this sort."

"Your uncle never found it dull," she observed.

"No; but somehow that was different. Mr. Caryll can't find very much to do in that lonely, tumble-down place."

"Oh, well, he's going gradually to restore the buildings to what they were before the fire."

"Not the castle!" said Ryman, incredulously.

"Yes; he's some notion of the kind. I've told him he's making a mistake there. If he wants to build he'd better go to the other side of the hill."

"What sort of a man is he to look at?" asked John Ryman suddenly. "I take it he must be at least forty, and I gather from what you said just now that he is remarkably good-looking."

"Richard Caryll is tall," said Lady Susan slowly, "tall and fair." I know he must be over forty. But he doesn't look his age. I think most people would agree to call him very good-looking—in any case he's a striking-looking man."

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"And dresses to the country squire rôle," suggested Ryman with a smile. He hadn't much sense of humour, but what he had was satirical in quality.

"The country squire rôle?" Lady Susan repeated, and then she broke into laughter. "You've seen him!" she cried. "Come, confess, John! But *where* did you see him?"

"I'm nearly sure we shared the same railway carriage" —he laughed too. "If my fellow-traveller was really this man Caryll—well, then, Aunt Susan, I suppose you will admit that he is just a little over-opulent, and a little too aware of his good points, eh?"

"No, I won't admit that," she said decidedly; "but I know what you mean."

"Well, if you know what I mean, that's enough. I think you must own that no one would take him for an ordinary Englishman."

"He isn't an ordinary Englishman," she said quickly. "He's had a very extraordinary life in a way, and he never forgets the fact that but for, well, an accident, he would now be Earl of Wolferstan."

"I suppose that's why he likes to have everything handsome about him," said her nephew good-humouredly. He felt that he had scored a point.

"And who can blame him?" said Lady Susan stoutly. "Richard Caryll isn't the sort of man who can have enjoyed roughing it. You can't wonder he likes to spend his money in making himself comfortable. Besides, he's not selfish with it all! He's very open-handed—so I hear from the people in the village. And now," Lady Susan got up from her chair, "I think I'll go to bed, John."

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As John Ryman followed his aunt down the broad, low passage, he was asking himself uncomfortably whether Lady Susan could possibly have any inkling of what he believed was known only to himself and to the head partner of a great firm of land agents. He had gone to considerable pains to conceal the fact that he had been the mysterious would-be purchaser of the old Sussex estate of Highways, a property to which there attached the sentimental interest of having been part of the vast domain once belonging to the now extinct Earldom of Wolferstan.

She, the while, was telling herself with grim amusement that it was just like John Ryman to suppose that such a fact as that he wished to buy the estate which marched with her land could possibly have escaped her knowledge. Why, she had been informed of every step of the negotiations! An attempt had naturally been made to bring her into the matter, to persuade her to—what was it that bumptious lawyer's clerk had called it?—to "spring" the extra two thousand pounds which would make the Baliol property a third larger than it was.

That had been early in the day, just before Richard Caryll had taken the winning hand in what had been a very pretty game. Lady Susan was glad, very glad, that Richard Caryll had gone in and won. Richard Caryll was a far pleasanter neighbour to herself than her nephew John would have been!

Lady Susan was a lonely old woman. She suffered more acutely from certain infirmities of age than she allowed those about her to know. If so good a thing as Mary Pechell's marriage to John Ryman came to pass, then, doubtless, Mary—the girl who had known how to

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wind herself round Lady Susan's dry old heart—would be very glad to come and be with her when John Ryman could spare a few days for the country.

Yes, if they two married, and she, Lady Susan, thought it almost certain they would do so, now that John had had the sense to make up his slow, sure mind—she would show him, John, her will, the will which made him what he so longed to know himself to be—her heir. She had no intention of dying to please him, however; she was in no mood to sing her Nunc Dimittis. But still it would be far better for Mary and John to stay with her in what would ultimately be their own home than for them to spend their holidays in the farmhouse where Richard Caryll had now established himself.

Richard Caryll? Lady Susan had not exaggerated her liking for this new element in her rather dull life. She had even gone so far as to tell herself that had she been a young woman he was the type of man who would have attracted a fancy which had been ardent though never tender. As it was, there was no one, with the exception of Mary Pechell, with whom she now felt in such quick, instinctive sympathy as she did with the new owner of Highways.

Their friendship had been a success from the very first. Caryll had given Lady Susan some sound advice about a reinvestment, and since that time—only a matter of a few months—the shares in question had nearly doubled in value. This was very pleasing to Lady Susan, for she was a shrewd woman of business. Also, Caryll, when giving his advice, had spoken in a way that had appealed to her imagination. He had told her *why* that Colonial stock

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was likely to improve, and the reason was a purely human reason. John Ryman would never have advised the purchase of a stock for such a reason. But then, John was entirely lacking in that sort of foresight.

Considering how indifferently she thought of her nephew's character, disposition, and intellect, it was illogical of Lady Susan to feel such satisfaction in the prospect of his marriage to a young woman whom she loved and esteemed as she did Mary Pechell. But clever people are never logical, and Lady Susan's long life had brought her, among other definite conclusions, the belief that for a woman the only possibility of permanent happiness in marriage lies in a *mariage de convenance.*

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CHAPTER III

"You are asking us to do a very serious thing, dear child; in fact, you are asking us to offer our hospitality to a criminal."

The elder Miss Charnwood looked up from the tea-table as she spoke and gazed thoughtfully at her niece.

Mary Pechell was standing on the grass in front of the two elder ladies.

"Hardly a criminal, Aunt Alice."

"Yes, Mary, an undoubted criminal," said Miss Charnwood firmly.

Still, all unconsciously, she was becoming used to deferring to her niece, and now her eyes rested with what she hoped was a successfully concealed admiration and pride on the slim, charming figure of the girl before her. She told herself wordlessly that her niece, Mary Pechell, if not exactly pretty, was a fine, distinguished-looking creature.

The two Misses Charnwood, different though they were the one from the other, were both intolerant judges of modern girlhood. They disliked equally the type of young womanhood who proclaims herself indifferent to men and men's admiration, and the more usual she whose one thought is how to provoke and retain the interest of the other sex. Mary Pechell—how glad both the elder ladies were of it—belonged to neither category.

"When your Aunt Rose and I suggested some one to

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whom we should like to give a pleasant little holiday," went on Miss Alice, "we did not exactly contemplate the sort of person whom you have just proposed, Mary. In fact, we never thought of your suggesting a man at all. Stop, my dear, do not answer me yet. We naturally supposed you would think of some nice girl, some lady who is working in London."

"This unfortunate Harold Donkins has bitterly repented of what he did do, Aunt Alice—" The speaker, with flushed face, turned appealingly to her younger aunt. "Surely, Aunt Rose, *you* believe in repentance?"

But there was no support to be obtained in that quarter, for the voice which now broke in—a gentle, deprecating, low-toned voice—spoke with no uncertain sound.

"I am glad the poor wicked young man has repented, Mary, but from what you tell us he does not seem at all the sort of person I should like to come and stay with us. Why, think of the silver! Dear father's old silver, that the man from Dilchester told us was so very, very valuable."

"Do you really mean to say that you think this young man whose story I have told you is a thief, Aunt Rose?"

Mary Pechell tried to speak lightly, but she felt angry, not only with her two aunts, but also with herself. What a fool she had been to make such a suggestion to them!

"We have not yet said that we *refuse* to have your—" Miss Charnwood hesitated, and then, with a not unkindly touch of humour, concluded with the words, "your unfortunate friend, my dear Mary."

"But I don't want him to come here, Aunt Alice, if that's the way Aunt Rose looks at the matter. I can assure you both that your silver would be quite safe—" Mary

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smiled a vexed, angry smile. "No, of course he shan't come! I'm very sorry I said anything about it! I was foolish—and inconsiderate too."

"Can't you think of some nice girl who would like a little holiday?" asked the younger Miss Charnwood plaintively.

Miss Rose, as everybody called her, had still the remains of a delicate beauty which had been, in a simple way and in that simple neighbourhood, famous a matter of thirty odd years ago. Many of the old village folk even now would recall, with ruminating surprise how extremely lovely their old clergyman's daughter had been. "Purty? Well, she were purty, was Miss Rose." How often Mary Pechell had heard those words—followed as often as not by the frank admission, "She *have* changed about, and no mistake!"

But Miss Rose had not changed as much in the thirty odd years as had her critics. If she had lived the life Providence had meant her to live—had she married, that is, the faithless young soldier who had loved and ridden away, she would have been, not only better looking, but infinitely more attractive, because sweeter-natured, than the majority of her married contemporaries.

Her skin was still smooth and soft, the colour would still come and go in her cheeks, and her dark blue eyes were still full of the simple fears and innocencies of youth. But the figure which had been so slender and pliant had thickened, and the diffidence which had been so graceful in the youthful beauty had become transformed into a nervous tremor, which only disappeared when Miss Rose was taken wholly out of herself by a feeling of pity or con-

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cern on behalf of some ailing or unhappy human being. As she had the tenderest heart and the kindliest nature, this fortunately often happened.

If Miss Rose had a failing, it was a love of pretty things and of pretty clothes. In this matter the two sisters were almost ludicrously apart in their ideals and appearance. Miss Alice wore stout, serviceable, and what she described as suitable clothes. Miss Rose affected delicate fabrics; cherished with loving care the laces and little jewels she had inherited from a grandmother; instinctively chose what was graceful in the fashions of the moment; and though she was now in her fifty-seventh year, and very seldom left the Sussex village where she had been born, liked to hear what they were wearing in Paris!

But the shock of her broken engagement, and life under the stern if loving rule of her elder sister, had made her shrink into herself, and sometimes made of her the butt of the less kindly of her neighbours.

She now added, in trembling tones, "You mustn't forget, my dear, that the Castle Farm is the nearest place to this house, and that we've only women servants here."

"Rose! I beg of you not to be a fool!"

And poor Miss Rose moved uneasily in answer to tone of sharp command in her sister's voice, and liste submissively as the other went on:

"You can't be serious in supposing that this y man of whom our niece has just told us would steal silver! My objection to him is quite other."

But the girl still standing in the sunlight, uncarin the sunburn, did not seem grateful for her elder au tardy championship.

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"Isn't it odd," she said abruptly, "that in theory all of us, at least all we Christians, think it a duty to hold out a helping hand to those who need it. But when it comes really to doing it—when it comes to a thing like this—well, then we draw back!"

Alice Charnwood was an honest woman. She looked at her niece consideringly.

"Yes," she said, "I admit that it *is* odd. I suppose most people are inconsistent. But still you must admit on your side that your account of this poor young man was not a very attractive one, Mary."

"Neither attractive nor unattractive." Miss Pechell spoke with a touch of scorn in her clear voice. "You asked me if I knew of any one to whom a holiday here would do good. Well, I do happen to know of such a person—this unhappy Harold Donkins, in whom, as I told you, Mr. Roberts takes a great interest. Of course he is weak, and I suppose silly as well, or he would never have become a cat's-paw. It's true he was sent to prison for six months, but then it's also true that Mr. Roberts believes him to be the sort of person who can be"—she hesitated a moment—
ıd then uttered the words "entirely reclaimed. As I
ık I told you just now, Mr. Roberts has got him a job
people who know all about him, but he thinks he
first to have a good change. I'll tell you exactly
Mr. Roberts did say."

ne was warming with her words, once more eager that
aunts should give the poor wretch a chance.

Mr. Roberts said, 'I only wish I could get Donkins
› the house of some kindly lady. It would go a long
ay to restore the young chap's self-respect.'"

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Mary's voice faltered; it lost part of the clearness of its quality, but to a man who was standing hidden behind the hedge which stretched its long length close to the lawn where sat and stood the Misses Charnwood and their niece, there was something exquisitely moving in her fresh young voice.

"Very well, my dear!" Miss Alice was conquered, and as is the way with the strong she took her beating in a generous spirit. "Write to Mr. Roberts to-morrow morning and tell him we shall be very glad to see this poor young fellow. We shall be pleased if he can stay a fortnight, or even three weeks."

The man who stood concealed behind the hedge was looking at a scene the like of which exists in thousands of English gardens every summer through. There was a wide-spreading lawn of bright green grass edged with a deep herbaceous border now in its greatest beauty. To the right lay the pleasant old house, built a hundred years ago, at a time when comfort was more studied than beauty, though beauty so often came unaware. Close to where the eavesdropper stood, sat the two Misses Charnwood, behind a low tea-table, and under the shade of a large evergreen oak. Near to them, but standing in the full warm light of the evening sun, was poised, in an attitude of long-limbed, all-unconscious grace, the figure of the tall, fair girl whose words had so stirred his heart.

"Mary, my dear, do come into the shade!" Miss Rose looked imploringly at her niece.

Mary obediently came and sat down by her aunts—and Miss Alice turned round quickly. "I'm sorry, Mary, for all I said just now. I know I'm not consistent. But

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you took me so by surprise. But we'll have your unfortunate protégé——"

"No," said Miss Pechell quickly. "It's very kind of you, Aunt Alice, but honestly I think it would be a mistake to have him here. You see it really would worry Aunt Rose," she smiled quite kindly as she spoke, and went on a little quickly. "The truth is that what made me think of it—and I admit that I was rather foolish to think of it at all—was your kindness over Tom Ryal at the grocer's shop! Taking money from the till seems so very much worse than passing a cheque which some one else has forged, doesn't it?"

"Well, no, my dear, I can't agree with you. It seems to me to be much worse to pass a cheque which some one else has forged than to take money from the till when your wife is ill and in need of comforts. Still, I admit I'm inconsistent even in that! Of course, I've known Ryal ever since he could talk. And then, Mary, you must be fair—I did not offer to take him into our house! All I did was to go and intercede for him with his employer."

"But it's all owing to you, Alice, that Mr. Caryll has given him another chance"—so piped out the voice of the younger sister. "In fact, Mrs. Ryal told me the other day that she felt quite glad now that her husband had taken that money from the till, as Mr. Caryll has been so *very* good to them all."

Mary's laugh rang out, and Miss Alice frowned.

"If I really thought that," she exclaimed, "it would make me very, very sorry I had interfered in the matter at all!"

"I'm quite longing to see Mr. Caryll," said Mary

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Pechell suddenly. "Do tell me something about him. What sort of a man is he?"

"He is a most agreeable and clever person," said Miss Rose eagerly.

And it was then that the man who had been standing concealed, so close to the speakers that he could hear every word of what they were saying, at last moved away, treading noiselessly on the soft short turf which lined the path.

Richard Caryll's code of honour, if it had not prevented an amount of innocent eavesdropping which some people would not perhaps have considered in the best of taste, utterly forbade him to stop and hear himself discussed by even such kindly new friends as were Miss Alice and Miss Rose Charnwood.

He had been on his way to call on the two maiden ladies with whom he had lately been brought into sudden close relation over their dishonest protégé, and he still meant to pay his call, for he was not a man to be lightly turned back from what he had set out to do. But there was plenty of time, and he told himself that it would be just as well to wait until the tea-things had been cleared away.

Caryll had no desire to break bread in what he knew to be the hospitable Little House. He very rarely accepted even casual hospitality from any one in the neighbourhood where he had only settled down some two months before, but where he had already been received with such flattering cordiality.

He made, however, one exception. He very often did break bread with Lady Susan Baliol. Even he had found it impossible to resist her commands to dinner, her half-satirical entreaties for his company at luncheon.

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But Lady Susan—was Lady Susan! Caryll, in spite of himself, was becoming oddly attached to the lonely, sharp-tongued old woman, and he was flattered by her preference for his society.

When he emerged from under the trees on to the open down Richard Caryll turned round and stood for a while, with folded arms, looking on a view which, if it had now become familiar, gave him ever-recurring delight, and that at whatever time of night or day, and in whatever kind of weather he happened to see it. He was intensely, it would have been thought by most of his new acquaintances morbidly alive to beauty of scenery, to charm of surroundings —in a word, to all the things that make life mean so much to those who have leisure and wealth to enjoy them.

But hitherto he had never spoken of what all this meant to him to any of those who pressed their genial offices upon him.

Though here, again, there was an exception. Lady Susan was aware how dear this stretch of home country had already become to him. But not even Lady Susan knew that through all his wanderings, and during what had been a long exile, he had always meant to come and do the thing he had now done—buy back, that is, some of the old Caryll property. He had been successful beyond, far beyond, his hopes, and now his eye rested with a kind of proud exultation on the great mass of wood to the left. That stretch of primeval forest land belonged to him. It thrust itself like a great pronged fork into the Baliol property.

Withdrawing his eyes from the wider view, he allowed

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them to focus themselves on the house and garden of the Misses Charnwood. It lay on the flank of the steep, bare down, a three-cornered, well-timbered patch; and from where he now stood only the long grey roof could be seen rising from among the trees planted thickly about the house, as had been a fashion when the property had been created by a maternal forbear of its present owners.

At the time the Little House was a-building, Richard Caryll's great-grandfather, that last Earl of Wolferstan whose eccentricities and prodigalities are to be found so often noted, reported, and—yes—awesomely admired, in the memoirs of his day, was living in considerable state at Highways Castle, the large mediæval stronghold of which, alas! now only the shell remained.

And the man who stood there on the great bare sweep of Sussex down suddenly asked himself whether his predecessor at Highways had ever come and stood where he was standing now; gazed, as he was gazing, down on the homestead then new, now old. Would the last Lord Wolferstan have deigned to be interested in so trifling a local matter as the building of the Little House? Richard Caryll, his namesake and natural heir, thought, yes—certainly. Even now the ownership of Highways carried manorial rights over the tiny property—the Misses Charnwood were only copyholders of their beloved home and charming garden.

But if ever Lord Wolferstan had come striding over the hill as he, Richard Caryll, had strode over the hill to-day, then had he almost certainly come companioned, for at the time the Little House was a-building Lord Wolferstan had not been living alone at Highways Castle.

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There was a lady there—and a lady who, unfortunately for the man who now visioned her, had not been her noble lover's wife, though to do that lover justice he had done his best to make both her and the submissive countryside forget the fact. For thirty odd years, that is from the day Lord Wolferstan had first led her through into the great hall with as much state and circumstance as if she had been his bride, till the hour of her death, she, the wife of another man, went by the name and style of Countess of Wolferstan.

In everything but legal fact Caryll's great-grandmother had been "My Lord's Lady," and my lord had even paid her the conclusively marital compliment of occasionally leaving her for long months while he went and amused himself in less reputable company in London and in Paris. But he always came back, sooner rather than later, and he proved, according to his own peculiar lights, a careful as well as a proud and affectionate father to the three children, the high-spirited handsome boy and the two pretty daughters, the poor lady bore him.

What wonder that in time those of the earl's neighbours whom he honoured with his notice came to say, if not absolutely to believe, that he and his Countess were indeed married. The curious, who will never let well alone, might show each other in secret some costly work of reference in which the Earl of Wolferstan was recorded a bachelor. Others, still more inquisitive, might state it as a fact that there still dwelt in savage solitude, not far from Dorchester, the country gentleman who had refused—so gossip asserted—a fortune as well as much pitiful pleading, to divorce his peccant wife. But in those days Dorset was a very long way from Sussex, and at last a rumour was put

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about that the unforgiving husband from whom her ladyship had run away more than a quarter of a century ago was dead!

"Even my parents-in-law, though they would not visit with Highways, at last believed her married," Lady Susan had said gravely in answer to a question of her new friend. But Lady Susan always showed unwillingness to discuss what was, after all, an unpleasant subject, and that although Richard Caryll had never disguised that he was painfully, feverishly anxious to hear anything she could tell of that strange old story of love and sin.

And now as he stood there, on this late June afternoon, looking over the wide stretch of beautiful country which must have changed so little in the hundred years, he conjured up a vision of the handsome pair advancing over the brow of the down.

They would be wearing fine clothes, for Lord Wolferstan was a noted beau, and a woman situated as was his *pseudo*-Countess could not afford—a pitiful thought that—to neglect any artificial advantage. And then at the time the Little House was being built Richard Caryll's great-grandparents must have been in the first flush of their not ignoble if unlawful romance, the man still his love's devoted servant, the woman still in the mood to think the world well lost for love, and perchance hoping the vengeful Dorset squire would set her free to become in name what she already was in all else.

Richard Caryll shrugged his shoulders, and a look of stormy unease and shame came over his keen, good-looking face. What a long train of disgrace, unhappiness, and —yes—crime, the self-indulgence of these two people had

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created for those who came after them! Then he pushed all these thoughts into the background—they were always more or less dwelling with him—and he took out his watch.

It was now ten minutes to six. If he meant to call on the Misses Charnwood to-day he must do so at once. Even his slight knowledge of the ways of their world told him that.

With long, quick strides he left the open down, and, unlatching the little gate, he walked through into the short avenue which remained a seldom-used right-of-way.

Soon he came to the spot where he had peeped and indulged in that eavesdropping which was really foreign to his nature. Yes, the ladies were still there, still sitting in the garden, and as he glanced through the green funnel for a moment a feeling of sharp envy filled his soul. How good it would be to come into that peaceful garden as a familiar, as a kinsman, even merely as a close friend, known from childhood to these kindly women. Fate had used him hardly—so he told himself with bitter dissatisfaction.

A few moments later he was being led through the corridor hall on to the lawn where the Misses Charnwood and their niece were spending the afternoon.

Miss Alice got up. She walked forward, a rather severe look on her face; but when she saw who the visitor was it broke into a very pleasant smile.

"Mr. Caryll?" she exclaimed. "Why, we were talking of you a few moments ago! Let me introduce to you my niece, Mary Pechell."

Miss Pechell got up from her chair with a graceful deliberate movement. She held out her hand, and it rested cool, soft, yet strong, in Richard Caryll's firm grasp. Then

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she withdrew her hand, and a little colour rose to her face. This stranger had kept her fingers in his a thought longer than most men hold the hand of a lady to whom they have just been introduced, and as their eyes had met he had given her a curious probing look. . . . She supposed these were Australian ways of acknowledging an introduction.

"I hope you were speaking kindly of me," he said, and Mary liked the peculiar deep cadence of Richard Caryll's voice.

"Yes, indeed we were, for we were talking of Tom Ryal, and of how good you have been to him!"

Richard Caryll did not stay very long on this, his first formal call at the Little House, and what he said was in no sense memorable.

Miss Alice discussed with him the question of the dishonest grocer's assistant in all its bearings. Gravely he acknowledged that he had perhaps dwelt too lightly on the seriousness of the offence. Not once did he specially address himself to his hostesses' niece, and she on her side remained very silent—more silent than was her wont, for Mary Pechell was a young, eager, ardent creature under her still, reposeful manner.

When he got up to leave, Miss Charnwood accompanied him to the gate which gave on to the little-used right-of-way; there she stood talking to him for some moments.

"Your aunt is very fond of Mr. Caryll," said Miss Rose in a low voice. "Do you like him, Mary?"

And Mary hesitated a moment—"Yes, I think I like him," she said at last. "I don't know that I should al-

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ways agree with him, but I do like him. He seems to have been wonderfully good about that man—in fact, too good, so Aunt Alice thinks."

Miss Rose looked at her doubtfully.

"I wonder if one can ever be too good," she queried timidly—"I mean, Mary, to people who have done wrong?"

"A great many people agree with Aunt Alice about that," said Mary—and she smiled a delightful, brilliant smile, which transformed her face, lighting it with happy humour. "In old days, Aunt Rose, people were either tremendously good to sinners, or else they were horribly cruel. Now the world has grown tepid. Crime is treated as a subject for scientific research. I don't know that we are very much better for the change. But, Aunt Rose"—for she saw that her aunt was looking anxious, a little bewildered—"let's change the subject! I've just remembered that I found something in Paris which I thought you would like. Let me go and fetch it now. I can't think how I forgot about it."

She went off into the house, and at that moment Miss Charnwood returned to her sister.

"I think I've brought Mr. Caryll to see how very important it is for the village that Ryal should be made to feel the seriousness of what he did. He's thinking of getting the man off to Australia. He, Mr. Caryll I mean, has a distant relation there who would look after him——"

And then she stopped short, for Mary's lithe figure was advancing from the house. In her hand she held what appeared to Miss Alice to be a lace scarf, bunched up in a fantastic shape.

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"You're always saying that you must take to a cap, Aunt Rose! If ever you do it you must take to this kind of cap. I really think it's very pretty. I saw an old lady in France wearing one—at least," she corrected herself quickly—"she was not an old lady at all, but her hair had gone grey; and I at once thought how pretty you would look in one like it!"

As she spoke the girl came and put the quaint frilled lace coif on Miss Rose's head.

"Mary, my dear, how very kind of you—" Miss Rose was again looking eager, grateful, happy.

And suddenly in Miss Alice's deep voice came the words, the chorus of an old song neither sister had heard for thirty years:

"Oh, I really must possess it!" and her eyes they fairly dance.
"But, dear Madam, are you certain, are you sure it came from France?"

"The French do have wonderful taste, sister," said Miss Rose pleadingly.

"English clothes have always been good enough for me," replied Miss Alice drily. "And then, after all—look at this cap—I'm not criticising your gift, Mary"—and she would have been surprised, even a little indignant, had any one pointed out to her that this was just what she was doing—"but nothing was ever simpler, nothing could be really more easy to make, or to copy, than this cap!"

"Still, I don't think any English capmaker would ever have thought of making anything like it," said Miss Rose, with a touch of obstinacy in her gentle voice.

"And very few Englishwomen of our age would care to

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wear such an odd-looking thing upon their heads," said Miss Alice sharply. "But never mind, Rose, as long as you're pleased I'm pleased."

"I've been thinking how very pretty it would look with my new grey-and-black lace dress," said Miss Rose wistfully.

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CHAPTER IV

John Ryman set out on his wooing in a chastened and yet a hopeful spirit. He had thought so much of Mary Pechell, she had become in so intimate and to him so real a sense part of himself during the last few weeks that it seemed scarcely possible that she on her side had not thought of him in a similar, though of course in a maidenly-waiting-to-be-asked sort of way.

Women generally, and especially young women, were a little afraid of John Ryman. His positive, short, sometimes sarcastic manner, was not of the kind that wins a man the suffrages of the other sex. But Mary Pechell, so he was well aware, had never been in the least afraid of him, partly no doubt because she had always, in a sense, been acquainted with him.

In very early youth ten years represents a generation. As a lad of fifteen John Ryman had not even known that the Misses Charnwood were already the proud aunts of a pretty little girl of five. Then gradually he had become aware of her existence, but not till her father died—that is, not till two years ago—had Mary fallen into the way of coming to Halkham; oftenest, of course, as the guest of her aunts, but often also as Lady Susan's.

It was a few days spent together at Halkham House which had suddenly made the two friends and led to their meeting in London. Yet Ryman, so he sometimes remembered now with an odd sense of discomfiture, had begun

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by scarcely thinking of her as a girl—certainly not as a marriageable young lady. Already Mary Pechell had arranged her life—a life of work among workers. Young as she was, her name was already known to those interested in such matters as the efficient organisation of a certain neglected branch of women's work. It was she who had galvanised into life the Society of Home Workers, she who, as the honorary secretary of the organisation, watched vigilantly over their interests.

Now, the course of John Ryman's life was such as to make him agreeably aware of the force and the reality of masculine supremacy. He had early acquired the kind of reputation which causes a man to be asked to become trustee to well-dowered spinsters, and to the type of wealthy widow who, till she loses her husband, has never been taught how to draw a cheque. With such ladies his intercourse was invariably pleasant; their weakness touched him, and as a rule, if they feared him, they also felt for him that confiding gratitude which in such natures as those with whom his trusteeship brought him in contact is akin to warm affection.

If only Lady Susan had been that sort of person, how delightful would have been their relationship! How gladly would he have found time in his already overfull business life to manage the Halkham estate!

Still, as he now walked along the pretty village street, trying to keep his mind from the coming interview, he acknowledged that there was a great deal to be said for Lady Susan. She kept the estate he hoped would one day be his in such an excellent condition! All around him was evidence of her strong hand and brain. The cottage gar-

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dens were each and all bright with flowers, and well kept. The cottage women of Halkham went in fear of Lady Susan, and she was not liked among them. Far too wise, as also too well-bred, to interfere in any intimate sense with her tenants' home concerns, she yet knew everything that happened in the village under-world, and that she possessed this knowledge irritated shrewdly the more independent of her vassals.

As John Ryman came near to the open gate of the Little House, the clock which had been put up by his grandfather as a memento of his golden wedding some thirty years before struck eleven.

Most men who are thinking of making an offer of marriage leave the question of time and place more or less to chance. But that was not John Ryman's way of arranging a matter of even trifling importance, how much less one of such vital moment!

Now he had given much thought as to what would be the best time to speak to Mary Pechell. He knew he could not escape seeing one, perhaps both, of the Misses Charnwood, when he called at the Little House. But he supposed himself less likely to see the two ladies at this time of the morning than at any other time. Miss Alice almost always went into the village before luncheon, and as for Miss Rose, she was likely to be busy in her gentle, feeble, futile way over some household matter.

He had written a note just before leaving town, asking Miss Pechell to spare him a few moments the following morning, but he had scarcely given her time to answer. That much uncertainty he had been content to leave to fate—but he had no doubt at all that Mary would be there

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waiting for him; he would have given much to know with certainty whether she had or had not guessed the nature of his business.

As he walked up the short, stiff drive which gave so little notion of the beautiful garden which lay behind the Little House, and as he stepped under the porch and rang the old-fashioned bell, he suddenly knew that his heart was beating fast. It was an odd, an untoward sensation, one John Ryman had never before experienced.

He had made up his mind to ask at once for Miss Pechell, but when it came to the point, when he saw the trim young parlourmaid waiting to hear what he had to say, he remained silent, and followed her humbly into the narrow, low-pitched drawing-room, and there John Ryman met with a disappointment—for both the Misses Charnwood were at home. Miss Rose, sitting by the now empty fireplace, was bending over an embroidery frame, while Mary's elder aunt was at her writing-table dealing with what looked a formidable mass of letters and bills.

A sensitive man, above all a man who had studied human nature more closely than John Ryman had ever troubled to do, would have at once suspected that the errand on which he was bound had been guessed by his two hostesses. Had he possessed that rueful sense of humour which is at once a help and a hindrance to so many men, he would have reminded himself that on an ordinary morning Miss Rose would not have been caught doing fancy work. Perhaps fortunately for himself, he was quite unaware of those trifles, light, imponderable as air, which mean so much in daily life.

As he shook hands with both ladies, Miss Rose's hand

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fluttered in its holder's firm grasp. "He's very strong," she said to herself with a delicious little tremor. "I do hope he will always be tender to darling Mary——"

"I think you want to see my niece about some matter of business," observed the elder Miss Charnwood coldly. "She's in the garden. Perhaps you will go out and find her there?"

"Thanks. Yes. I've come specially to see her. Thank you very much, Miss Charnwood."

Ryman felt as if it was some other man's voice speaking. A sudden, sharp feeling of misgiving had come over him like a wave of icy water. He almost decided to say nothing —to-day. Perhaps it would be better for him to write. He was aware that he wrote a remarkably good business letter. He had taught himself, with some difficulty, the art of expressing exactly what he wished to say in the clearest and shortest way.

He turned towards the door.

"Stop, John—" Miss Charnwood's voice suddenly became kind. "That's not the shortest way to the garden!" She pointed to the long French window. "You can go out this way, and I should be glad if you would kindly shut the window behind you. A draught is sometimes dangerous on such a hot day as this."

"Yes, Miss Alice, very true."

Somehow the way she had just spoken made John Ryman feel as if he was a little boy again. Alice always called him "John." Rose, who when he was a child had always addressed him as "Dear little Johnnie," now that he was grown up and had become a great man, followed the village people, and called him "Mr. John." As for Mary

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Pechell, she had remained on quite formal terms with him—they were "Mr. Ryman" and "Miss Pechell" to one another, and it had never occurred to him to ask her to call him anything else.

"Oh, Alice, I do wonder so what he will say to her!"

Miss Rose pushed away her embroidery frame and clasped her hands nervously together.

"For all we know, Rose, he may be wanting to speak to Mary about some quite simple matter. She did not seem in the least agitated or surprised when she got his note."

"But then Mary is so very peculiar," faltered Miss Rose. "Mary is in some ways so like you, sister. I—I only mean about gentlemen."

"Upon my word, Rose, you don't choose your words very happily!"

Miss Charnwood lifted her writing-desk off the table where it always stood and walked down the long narrow room till she was close to the window which looked out over the drive. She placed the desk on a little rosewood table, and sat down in front of it, so that her back was turned to the window commanding a view of the garden.

Miss Rose's blue eyes had followed her sister's movements with mild surprise and interest. She and Alice never sat over at that farther end of the drawing-room, and since they had moved from the Rectory to the Little House, nothing but a bowl of flowers had ever been placed on the rosewood table.

Miss Rose cautiously turned her head round and gazed out of the window which opened into the garden, and she was gladdened by witnessing what she could not help

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hoping was an auspicious meeting. For Mary Pechell was coming towards the house, a smile on her fair face, and with right hand outstretched, to meet John Ryman. She had on a white cotton dress, and she was wearing a pink sun-bonnet.

Miss Rose told herself that the darling girl really looked like a picture! Mary's taste in dress was simple and rather severe, but to-day, fortunately——

"Rose!"

Miss Rose jumped. Then, with a sigh, she turned obediently round, withdrawing her wistful eyes away from the sight which had so moved and pleased her.

"Yes, Alice?"

"Come over here—at once! What you are doing is most indelicate."

Miss Rose got up and walked slowly towards her sister. It was hard indeed that she should be always treated as if she were a child—and, and sometimes as though she were a naughty child, too.

The tears ran down her cheeks. "I don't think, Alice, that you ought to be unkind to me to-day," she said, with a break in her gentle voice.

"Nonsense! I am never unkind to you, and we don't yet know if to-day *is* unlike another day. If you can't command yourself you had better go up to your bedroom.

But Miss Rose, with a long convulsive sigh, did command herself. She came and sat down close to her sister. "I wonder how long he will stay here," she said plaintively. "I feel as if I can hardly bear the suspense."

"I expect you'll have to bear the suspense for a considerable time," said Miss Charnwood grimly. "Mary

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and John are both people who like to keep their own counsel. I am sure he would wish to tell Lady Susan before receiving *our* congratulations. And if Mary refuses him—you've not considered that possibility, Rose—then I'm quite sure she'll say nothing about it!"

This was quarter-day, and Miss Charnwood was making out some cheques, but after she had spoiled two she put down her pen and stared thoughtfully out of the window opposite to which she had established herself and her desk.

The drive looked very nice in winter, but not nice, in fact rather dusty and shabby, in summer. She wondered whether after all there was something in the notion—she had read about it in some gardening book a week or two back—of doing away with the laurel hedges and of making a straight path from the road to the front door. At the time she had thought the suggestion rather absurd, but there might be something in it after all. Mary had seemed to like the idea. . . .

And then Alice Charnwood gave up what was after all only an elaborate pretence with herself. She allowed her mind to dwell on the momentous interview she supposed to be taking place in the garden between her niece and John Ryman.

How strangely things fall out in this strange world. Mary Pechell and Lady Susan's nephew and heir? Ironic Time's revenge for the cruel way Lady Susan had interfered years ago in poor Rose's love affair; for it was Lady Susan—she had made no secret of it—who had persuaded her young cousin, Alick Stair, to behave in the shameful way he had behaved to Rose Charnwood.

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But this time Lady Susan would be pleased—nay, more, overjoyed. It was clear even to Alice Charnwood that she had done everything in her power to throw John Ryman and Mary Pechell together. Lady Susan's satisfaction was the one fly, a very big fly, in Miss Charnwood's ointment. She had never forgiven Lady Susan the part she had played in Rose's tragedy.

Now she turned sharply round.

"Rose!" but this time the note of reproof was softer somehow, though Miss Rose, with her hands clasped together, was staring eagerly, unashamedly, down the long room, and so into the garden, looking a rather pathetic, and certainly an absurd figure.

"I can't help it!" she said with a catch in her voice. "It's no good, sister! I can't help it! I feel too agitated to go on with my work. And, besides, there's no harm in what I am doing, for they're gone—they're no longer there."

Then, and not till then, Miss Alice allowed herself to turn round and look out into the garden too. Yes, it was true. The young people had disappeared, out of sight of the house. A very natural thing for them to do, when one came to think of it.

"Would you mind going out on to the down? We are less likely to be interrupted there than here—" and even as John Ryman spoke he led the way to the gate close to which, only the day before, Richard Caryll had stood, an unseen spectator of the little scene which had taken place between the Misses Charnwood and their niece.

"Certainly," said Mary Pechell, and for the first time

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a slight misgiving, a prevision of what was coming, swept across her.

She put her gardening basket down on the grass and stepped out of the little gate in front of him. In a curious, strained silence they walked up through the avenue of beeches till they found themselves on the open down.

And then she turned and faced him, her hands—though he was not aware of it—clenched together.

"Well, Mr. Ryman, what is it you wish to say to me?" And there was that in her voice—a quiver of fear, of instinctive revolt—which should have warned him.

But John Ryman for the moment had a little lost his head. He was not his own cool, observant, over-civilized self—he had suddenly turned into primitive man—and a primitive man very much in love with the young woman who stood facing him with all her maidenhood in arms against what she was inclined to regard as an unprovoked attack.

But the besieger was lacking in the finesses of generalship—this was the first time he had trained his batteries against a feminine fortress. All he saw was that Mary Pechell looked prettier, younger, more exquisitely womanly than he had ever seen her before this memorable morning. When in London she somehow stripped herself of softness —womanliness—of youth. Seeing her as she was to-day filled John Ryman with a masterful sense of how right he was to disapprove of ladies doing any kind of work.

But he must not say that to her—just yet.

"We've become friends," he said hoarsely, "good friends, have we not?"

"Yes," she said, looking at him steadily. "I've been

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very grateful to you, Mr. Ryman, for all you've done for me. You've been very kind about my work."

"No, no, I don't mean that!" he cried, frowning. "Surely you know what I have come to say?"

A wild impulse to seize and carry her off in his arms somewhere—anywhere swept over him. Instead, he said very quietly, and in a very low voice: "I think you must know by now that—that I love you, that my dearest wish is for you to become my wife——"

And then as he saw the deep flush of pain and offence which flooded her face, a feeling of utter wretchedness, of angry disappointment, and of humiliation such as in the whole of his successful, self-confident life he had never known, swept over John Ryman. For the moment it made of him a far humbler and less aggressive human being than he had ever been before.

"No, I did not know it. I never thought of such a thing," she said at last; and from red she became very pale.

Ryman was quick to seize on his advantage.

"I don't ask you to give me a definite answer," he said instantly. "Take as much time as you want to think about it. Try to get accustomed to the idea—" he tried to smile, but he looked so unhappy, so baffled, that she averted her eyes from his face. "If you feel we don't know one another enough—let us wait. I'm not in any hurry—I'm used to waiting."

"I'd rather answer now," she said desperately. She was so afraid he might end by marrying her against her will! "The truth is, Mr. Ryman, I don't wish to marry. I'm quite happy and satisfied with the life I lead."

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And then, as she again saw the hungry, balked expression come into his face, she was swept by a feeling of great regret and concern, for Mary Pechell possessed that in which the man who loved her was so lacking—the instinctive knowledge of what suffering in others means to them.

"I'm so sorry," she said, her voice at last faltering. "Please forgive me the pain I am giving you. I honestly don't think you would have been happy with me. We're so different! You know how very seldom we agree about anything"; and then she in her turn tried to smile.

He shook his head angrily, and again he touched a chord of her nature to which she ever responded, that chord which is so erroneously believed to be akin to love.

"Do let's go on being friends—as we were before," she said imploringly.

It was terrible to her to know she had it in her power to make any one look as unhappy as John Ryman looked.

She held out her hand, and he grasped and held it tightly.

"Tell me," he said roughly, "is there any one else? I know I haven't the right to ask you—but—but I want to know."

"No"—she drew her hand away—"there is no one else, Mr. Ryman. I was quite honest in what I told you just now. I—I don't intend to marry. I've thought about it. Every woman thinks about marriage. But I care too much for the work I am doing. Of course I know you think that's an absurd point of view; but then you think a good many of the things I do absurd."

He looked at her gloomily, but nevertheless there had

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come over him an extraordinary lightening of the spirit. He had been jealous, vaguely, but none the less once or twice cruelly jealous of the men—some of them well-known and even very distinguished with whom the Society of Home-Workers brought her in contact.

"There are *some* women in the world who don't want to be married, Mr. Ryman!" she smiled in her old way—the way that at once teased and allured him. "Take Lady Susan—I don't think she can have wanted to be married!"

And then Mary Pechell suddenly saw that she had chosen an unfortunate instance to prove her point.

But John Ryman did not pursue his advantage. He was not quick at the up-take, and Miss Pechell felt grateful for his forbearance to make an easy point.

"Then we'll go on just as usual?" he said rather solemnly when they reached the gate leading back into the garden of the Little House. "Promise me that you won't let this make any difference."

"No, if—if you'll promise to forget what's happened to-day." And as he made no answer she went on a little breathlessly, "I'm quite, quite sincere, Mr. Ryman. I do not intend to marry. My work more than satisfies me."

"Of course I quite understand that," he said soberly. "And that's just the reason why we can go on as before."

But it is easier to make such a resolution as one of these two had made in all sincerity than it is to carry it out.

The next day Mary Pechell did not pay her usual Sunday afternoon call on Lady Susan, and John Ryman on his side suddenly made up his mind that it would be just

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as well for him to go back to town in time to start work on Monday instead of on Tuesday morning.

But when he told Lady Susan of his decision she felt a flash of strong displeasure. Then John was hesitating—hanging back—weighing Mary in the balance? Well, it would serve him right if some one else stepped in and carried her off!

"I thought you were staying till Tuesday," she said sharply.

"There's a man I ought to see to-morrow—a man connected with the Grand Junction——"

"Oh! yes, I forgot that new directorship of yours. You're pleased about it, I suppose?"

"Well," he said modestly, "I am rather pleased to have it, if only because my grandfather and my father had so much to do with founding the line."

"Will the shares go up now that you are going to help manage it? Or will that rogue Mannington still use them as counters?"

"Mannington's claws are cut now, Aunt Susan. Of course, I hope the shares will rise"—her sarcasm was generally lost on him.

"A lot of your own fortune is in it?" Lady Susan spoke interrogatively. "I've always been glad your uncle sold most of his shares. Railways have had their day."

"I don't agree to that, you know!" He spoke quite good-humouredly. "I've still a good deal of money in Grand Junks—and other people's money, too. It's still a prosperous concern, Aunt Susan."

"Then you don't mean to let it be swallowed up by the Great Northern," she said quickly.

"Well—that depends."

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John Ryman smiled. Lady Susan's interest in finance always amused him. She would have made a very good, if a rather venturesome, man of business.

"Aunt Susan?"

"Yes, John."

"I think I ought to tell you that yesterday"—a pause —"I asked Mary Pechell"—a longer pause—"to be my wife."

How clear and sarcastic were Lady Susan's light blue eyes. Already Ryman regretted his confidence.

"Yes, John?" Lady Susan looked at him fixedly.

"She said she did not intend to marry——"

"That's nonsense, of course!"

"I thought you'd think so."

And now, suddenly, he was glad he had taken his aunt into his counsels.

"But it's settled we're to go on knowing one another. She—she assures me there's no one else." He muttered the last few words between his teeth.

"Then you will certainly end by getting her."

Lady Susan sighed. It was a long, unconscious sigh of intense relief. She also had been jealous, vaguely jealous, of the men, aye, and of the women too, with whom Mary's work brought her in contact.

She waited a moment, then—"I'm very pleased about this, John."

"I hoped you would be."

"Yes, I am. I've formed a very high opinion of Mary Pechell. But I should never have expected you to—to——"

"—Agree with you, Aunt Susan?"

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They both smiled.

"Well, I'm glad we do agree about Mary," he said at last.

"You've never been much of a bachelor," said the old lady critically.

"I don't know what you mean, Aunt Susan."

Lady Susan often puzzled John Ryman by the queer things she said.

"You've always been so—so staid," she had meant to use another word, but one cannot—especially if one is his aunt—reproach a man with being steady.

"Have I?" Somehow he felt discomfited.

"Yes," she said dryly. "But there—I expect it's all for the best, though, as my dear father used to say, 'Bachelors make the best husbands.'"

Ryman stared at her. What on earth did she mean? The older she grew the more often Lady Susan quoted her father—and sometimes the quotations were—well, scarcely quotable by a lady. Perhaps the most significant of the many differences existing between John Ryman and Mary Pechell was that whereas John hated the wraith of the old Scots earl, Mary would have given much to have known him.

"I hope I shall make a good husband," the young man said soberly.

"I've no doubt you will—no doubt at all! But we've got to get you married first——"

John Ryman winced.

"Come down next Friday and stay till Tuesday."

"Thanks, Aunt Susan. By the way—I forgot to ask her—is Miss Pechell staying on here for any time?"

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"Miss Pechell?" What a queer, formal fellow John Ryman was! "Yes, I believe she'll be at the Little House all July and August—with just a day or two away now and again to see her toilers. I haven't asked you what you mean to do about all that, John? D'you intend her, even after her marriage, to do her share of the world's work?"

"She's already done her share," he said quickly.

"I doubt she thinks that!"

He let the challenge drop.

"Then I'll come next Friday—if you can do with me again so soon."

"I wish you would stay now. It's never wise to run away. Besides, I've asked Richard Caryll to dinner to-morrow."

"I shall meet Richard Caryll quite soon enough——"

And on that not very gracious word they parted.

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CHAPTER V

Lady Susan's face brightened into eager welcome. It was five minutes to eight. She felt pleased that her guest was so punctual. Sometimes the young men and women who stayed with her were shamefully unpunctual; they would come down a quarter of an hour late, and make no apology for their want of manners and of good feeling.

As she grew older the mistress of Halkham House looked forward to her dinner. It was a pleasant ending to what often proved a very long day.

Richard Caryll's hostess was dressed to-night with a good deal of care. On her black velvet gown was some fine old lace, and she wore beautiful emeralds.

As he came into the room her guest's eyes rested on her with affectionate approval. It was odd how fond he had already grown of this old lady; but then she, on her side, had already grown very fond of him.

It is said that kissing goes by favour. But what is it that provokes and retains what we choose to call favour—that odd instinct which draws us to one human being and alienates us from his fellow? John Ryman was ever punctual, always down a few moments before the dinner bell sounded. But his aunt by marriage never stopped to think that this conduct on his part was meritorious.

"Well," she said, holding out her thin, blue-veined hand. "Well, my dear neighbour, and what have you been doing with yourself to-day? I rather hoped you would come in

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yesterday afternoon. I should have liked you to meet my nephew, John Ryman. He's thought a great deal of in these parts—and in other parts as well!"

Caryll waited a few moments before answering. He was in as little hurry to see John Ryman as John Ryman was to see him.

"I understand your nephew is very clever. At least I gather as much from Mrs. Segrave."

"Mrs. Segrave?" Lady Susan made as much of a grimace as she ever allowed herself to make. "D'you see much of the Segraves?" she asked.

"Well, I see a certain amount of them. I believe I'm going to a party there to-morrow afternoon."

"D'you like the girls?"

"Why, yes, I think I do," he said. "They seem nice girls as far as I can judge. But the truth is, Lady Susan, I know very little of girls."

"Don't you?" she looked up at him sharply. "I find it difficult to believe that, Mr. Caryll. I take it human nature is not so very different in Australia to what it is here."

"Human nature?" he repeated the words questioningly, but his face flushed.

"Men and women! Come, you know what I mean, Mr. Caryll. I don't ask you to tell tales—but you're not going to tell me that my sex"—she hesitated, then shot out the words, "overlooked you, eh? I don't suppose you've had much call to complain of their neglect."

But there came no answering twinkle in his eyes. "I meant English girls, Lady Susan. I know very little of nice English girls, or English women either, for the matter of that."

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And she admired his reticence. "Now comes your opportunity of making good the omission," she said dryly. "And it would be the merest affectation to pretend ignorance of the fact that the whole neighbourhood is busy marrying you."

He moved a little uncomfortably under the direct, rather mocking gaze. "I'm afraid I shall keep them busy for a very long time," he said. "I do not think I'm in the least likely to marry."

"And why not?" she inquired. "My father used to say that marriage is the triumph of hope over experience. Is that how you feel about it?"

"No," he said. "No, Lady Susan. The truth is——"

"No one ever tells the truth about these things," she interrupted him ruthlessly. "I should be sorry to think that you would never marry. There's only one piece of advice I would give you, Mr. Caryll——"

He leant forward and looked at her, and she told herself that he was in very truth a remarkably handsome and distinguished-looking man, even if—as John Ryman had implied—his pearl studs were a trifle too large and fine, even if his clothes had that indefinable look as if he had been successfully melted into them.

"I should advise you to go for *mind* and *manners*. Nothing else matters in the long run—of course, I mean in marriage."

"Then you do not advise me to fall in love?" He spoke quite lightly, as if he was playing with the subject.

"For God's sake don't do that!" she said hastily. "I won't go as far as my dear father, who used to say that the only safe way for a bachelor is to fall in love with a married

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woman. Besides, you've been all through that, I take it. And more than once, eh? No, no; it's a very dangerous thing—believe me, I know what I'm talking about—to base so serious an undertaking as marriage on love."

"You back mind and manners, Lady Susan. How about heart?"

She gave him a queer, sideways look. "Heart?" she repeated, sounding the *r* in the word more than is usual. "Yes; I suppose no man cares to marry a woman wholly lacking in heart. Though a heart's a rarer possession than you men quite realize, Mr. Caryll."

"I agree!" exclaimed Caryll shortly. More lightly he added, "The young ladies in our neighbourhood (it pleased him to say 'our neighbourhood' to Lady Susan) all have very good manners. At least so it seems to me."

"Yes," she said grudgingly, "fair manners, I'll allow, but very little mind. I wish there were a better choice open to you." And then, with the kind of rather coarse directness which so offended those who did not like her, Lady Susan began to dissect the young women of the neighbourhood for her new friend's benefit.

As she spoke Richard Caryll moved uneasily in his chair. The discussion offended his sense of delicacy, and also he was waiting for a name Lady Susan did not choose to utter. Twice he was on the point of saying, "And Miss Pechell, Lady Susan?" but some deep, still obscure instinct restrained him.

The door was opened by the old butler. "Dinner is served, my lady!" Ceremoniously Caryll offered his hostess his arm, and together they proceeded into the oval dining-room.

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As she sat down, "By the way," she said, "I forgot to ask you—have you made the acquaintance of my good friends, Alice and Rose Charnwood?"

"Yes," said Caryll. "I've made great friends with the elder Miss Charnwood over a protégé of hers, a man called Ryal."

"You mean our village thief?" said Lady Susan, smiling.

Caryll winced. "Yes," he said, "our village thief, and a very good sort of man, Lady Susan!"

"I daresay—" she dismissed Ryal from her mind. "And tell me—have you seen Miss Charnwood's niece, Mary Pechell?" Lady Susan looked up a little eagerly.

"I went to the Little House to-day," he said, "and Miss Pechell was there too."

The servants left the room for a moment.

"Now, there's a girl"—Lady Susan was speaking meditatively, perhaps uttering her thoughts aloud—"who has mind, manners, and—what you said you valued most of all, Mr. Caryll—heart. Unluckily for you, she's bespoke!"

Lady Susan looked straight across her dining-table and smiled at her guest, and then she repeated the fateful word with a certain malicious pleasure. "Bespoke! And to a man who will never give her the slightest excuse for—well, what I suppose we may call the exercise of heart, and yet—so wags the world—who will make her an excellent husband!"

And then they drifted into more general talk, both agreeably at ease with the other, till Lady Susan got up. As Richard Caryll held the door open for his hostess she threw at him over her shoulder the words, "Will you come

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into the boudoir presently? We shall be more comfortable there."

Slowly he went back to the table and poured himself out half a glass of wine. He had discovered that Lady Susan liked him to stay behind in the dining-room for at least a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes.

And then, with a strange, furtive glance, Richard Caryll looked round him with a shamed feeling of being an impostor in this kind old woman's house; and yet his great-grandfather, as a quite young man, must often have sat in this charming room, an indulged, if not an honoured guest.

No, he was not in any sense an impostor! He had never told Lady Susan anything that was not true. Indeed, he had been to the farthest limit of prudence in what he had told her. And then she had guessed—leapt on the truth the second time they had met, and he had not been able to resist telling her that she had guessed right. But he was quite safe with her. She was not a blabbing woman.

At last, when the quarter of an hour was up, he left the dining-room, walked across the hall and down the broad passage which was becoming so pleasantly familiar. He was pleased that Lady Susan was receiving him here to-night instead of in the drawing-room. The boudoir seemed to be, in an intimate sense, her territory. It was not haunted, as were the other rooms of Halkham House, by the ghost of that honest gentleman, Lady Susan's late husband.

His hostess seemed in a more gracious, a more forthcoming mood than usual. She always felt a touch of relief after one of John Ryman's brief visits, and this time she had a malicious pleasure in the knowledge of his rebuff.

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Some women would have been annoyed, even angered, that Mary Pechell had not fallen in at once with her plan. But Lady Susan rather admired Mary for having said no. Why should everything he wanted come at once to John Ryman? Hitherto he had been extraordinarily fortunate. It would do him good to wait awhile, and humble himself.

"I want to ask you something, Lady Susan," and as she straightened herself in her high-backed chair and looked at him fixedly, Caryll flushed. "I'm afraid you'll think I always hark back to the same subject, and that not a very pleasant one, but you must remember that there is no one else in the neighbourhood to whom I have ever mentioned, or to whom I ever mean to mention, it."

"Yes?" she said a little coldly. "By all means ask me anything you like."

"I want you to tell me exactly what happened on the death of my great-grandmother. Of course, I know the bare facts—though, by the way, I am really rather hazy even as to the bare facts."

"If you know the facts, then I rather wonder, Mr. Caryll, why you are anxious to hear my version. You forget that though I am a very old woman I was only a year old when Lady Wolferstan died, and I didn't come here till I was close on thirty."

"I know, but still I should be very grateful if you would tell me what you have heard of it," he pleaded.

"I will do so." She waited a moment as if gathering together her thoughts. "Well, as I told you once, there had come to be an impression—a totally erroneous impression—('I'll knock on the head any foolish thought of

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a conceivable claim to the title,' she said to herself) that Lord Wolferstan had at last been able to marry Mrs.—Mrs.——"

"Dering." Caryll supplied the name at once.

"Yes, Mrs. Dering. It had been put about that her husband was dead. That was untrue, in fact, almost ludicrously so. He was not only alive, but still venomously anxious for revenge—after all those years. At last this malignant creature heard in some roundabout way that the poor woman was dying, and he obtained an order—it is said that he did so many months before her death—by which Lord Wolferstan should be compelled, as soon as she was dead, to deliver up her body to its lawful possessor."

"How horrible!" said Richard Caryll in a low voice. "My God, how horrible!"

"Yes—but we must remember on the other hand it can't have been very pleasant for Mr. Dering to have had his lovely young wife stolen from him. In any case, this was the strange form he chose his vengeance to take."

"But he was balked," said Caryll, jumping up and taking a short turn in the room.

Then he came and stood before her. "He was balked!" he repeated.

"Yes," said Lady Susan a trifle coldly, "Mr. Dering was certainly balked of his vengeance. And when I first came to this part of the world there were people living who remembered the tragedy vividly. I remember an old woman at one of our farmhouses saying that had the poor lady's husband made it clear, as he afterwards asserted, that he simply wished to lay her with her own

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people in Dorset, everything might have gone off decently and in order. But he did nothing of the kind; instead he sent an attorney armed with the warrant, and an undertaker armed with a coffin. With these people Lord Wolferstan refused to hold any parley. But the lawyer was a determined and intelligent man. He stated, in a respectful letter, that if within twelve hours Mrs. Dering's body was not forthcoming he would be compelled to appeal to the High Sheriff. Well—you know as well as I do what happened in those twelve hours!"

Caryll nodded, but Lady Susan had warmed to her story.

"Lord Wolferstan sent for his groom of the chambers, and told him that he meant to sit up alone that night with the body of his wife. Then he ordered every soul out of the castle. What happened then no one knew. He barred the shutters of the death chamber, and then in the early morning it is supposed he set the room on fire. It seems to have been thought at the time that he had not intended the rest of the castle to burn. Be that as it may, the whole place was well alight before the fire was discovered. In those days all country people, gentle as well as simple, went early to bed, and it was by the merest chance, so my husband's mother once told me, that the fact that Highways Castle was on fire became known in Halkham before morning. She herself always believed that Lord Wolferstan meant to destroy the castle. He knew his son could not inherit, and there can be no doubt that he was mad with grief at losing the poor woman, and with rage at the insult that her husabnd had put upon him. And then that was not all. Your grandfather—perhaps what I am going to

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tell you now may be news to you—was already giving him trouble—was already proving himself, that is, the son of his father. The boy was dissipated, extravagant, headstrong."

Richard Caryll reddened from brow to chin.

"I know," he muttered.

Lady Susan looked at him fixedly, and when she next spoke there came a sarcastic inflection into her voice. "I wonder if you know who *my* great-grandmother was," she said.

Caryll turned and looked at her. "Your great-grandmother?" he repeated hesitatingly.

"She was the daughter of a Highland shepherd. And were it not that Scots law is so much kinder to erring woman than is English law, you and I wouldn't be sitting here—in fact it passes the limit of my imagination to say where I should be or what I should now be doing, supposing, that is, I were in the world at all! And my great-grandfather," went on Lady Susan, with a twinkle in her eye, "could not compare with *your* great-grandfather as regards general decency of conduct, for he hadn't the slightest intention of making an honest woman of my great-grandmother—in fact, he never did make an honest woman of her! She became his wife as it were by accident, and there was a great case about it which is still discussed with zest by Scottish lawyers. She seems to have been a clever as well as a pretty creature, for she persuaded him to take her travelling, and in England—not in Scotland, mark you—they passed for a while—they at any rate put up at one inn as man and wife. That fact enabled my grandfather to prove his legitimacy."

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"What a strange story!" exclaimed Caryll.

"So you see you and I have more in common than you thought we had. But, Mr. Caryll, there is one great difference between us"—something in her voice compelled his respectful attention. "I am an old woman and your sincere friend, so I hope you will forgive me for saying what I am going to say to you. The great difference between us is that *I* do not allow my mind to dwell on the unsavoury story of my forbears——"

"You have no reason to remember it," he said in a low voice.

"Of course I do not pretend that the cases are on all fours—no two cases ever are—and I quite admit that your grandfather, aye, and perhaps your father, had reason for feeling bitter. Of course, it is an awful thing to be born into the world with no proper status, without even a name. I admit all that, though everything, mind you, was done for Lord Wolferstan's son. Had he conducted himself with common prudence and good sense, he would have enjoyed an excellent position. But for you to feel as you do about the matter is really wrong—and, and forgive me for saying so—morbid! You tell me that your father was an honest, God-fearing gentleman, that your mother was not only of his own caste in life, but the best woman you have ever known. Well then, what have you to complain of? I suppose that you were poor"—Caryll bent his head—"but poverty, Mr. Caryll, is not such a very terrible thing after all!"

"Are you sure of that, Lady Susan?"

A curiously harsh look came over his face; but Lady Susan was old, and just now she avoided looking at the

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man to whom she was speaking, so she did not see that singular look.

"Yes, I am quite sure of that. I've known many poor and happy people in my time. Besides, now you are not poor! Here you are—clever, good-looking, healthy, and through your own exertions, so I understand, possessed of very considerable wealth. What more do you want? It irks you not to be Earl of Wolferstan! But, my dear friend, is that quite reasonable? I might as well spend my time in crying my eyes out that I was not a boy instead of a girl. If I had been a boy I should have been a far better earl, I'll be bound, than my cousin has managed to be! No, no, Mr. Caryll, I wish you'd give me your word not to think any more of that—that melancholy, indeed terrible, old story. In these days no one troubles about a man's father, still less who his grandfather was! As for me, I am absolutely sincere in saying that I would far rather have made a fortune than have inherited one!"

"I daresay you're right," he said reluctantly. "I admit I do think a great deal too much of the past and of what might have been."

"It's the more odd," said Lady Susan briskly, "because—forgive me for saying so, Mr. Caryll—I've never met a man who seemed to me less of a snob than yourself."

He drew himself up a little. "Well, no, I hope—I trust I am not a snob, Lady Susan."

"I declare, sometimes I'm very sorry you've taken the name."

"Taken the name?" he repeated, in a tone of surprise.

"Why, yes, Mr. Caryll, of course you've taken the name. Your father was not called Caryll."

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He stared at her without speaking, and there was an expression of fear and dismay in his face.

"No," he said at last. "That's quite true, Lady Susan. But you doubtless know that the name of Caryll was borne for a considerable time by my grandfather? I think I was justified in taking it."

"Yes, I agree that you were," she said briefly. A question trembled on her lips, but she refrained from putting it—and very soon after he got up to go.

"You're not offended, Mr. Caryll?"

"No, indeed! It's very good of you to take the trouble to think of me and of my concerns at all."

"And you'll try to follow my advice?"

"Yes," he said earnestly, "I will. And—and, Lady Susan?"

"Yes."

"I can absolutely rely on your kind promise of telling no one of my connexion with that old story on which you think I dwell overmuch?"

"Certainly, Mr. Caryll. You can rely on my absolute discretion," but as she spoke Lady Susan remembered with a touch of discomfort that she had been indiscreet, with regard, however, to only one person, and that person John Ryman.

"Of course if you wish the fact never to be suspected you were perhaps ill-advised to take the name." And as there again came over her guest's face a look of annoyance and unease, she added, "but practically no one now remembers the old story. If you had denied the connexion, I should have taken it to be a mere coincidence——"

Richard Caryll felt a thrill of keen regret that he had

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admitted the truth to this shrewd old lady. But life had made him something of a fatalist, and, as Lady Susan had well said, in these days no one troubles as to who a rich man's father may happen to have been. Here, in this placid neighbourhood, they were only too ready to accept him without question as a most agreeable addition to their high little world.

Early the next morning, when lying awake, as she often did lie awake during the hours of her long nights, Lady Susan Baliol suddenly spoke aloud:

"*Wigney!*" she exclaimed. "*That* was the name under which the unfortunate man went bankrupt—*Wigney!* Caryll is a better sounding name than Wigney. I don't wonder he changed it!"

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CHAPTER VI

Mrs. Segrave was the most commonplace, and in an intimate sense the least agreeable, member of the little group of people who composed the society of Halkham and its immediate neighbourhood. She was the least agreeable because she was the most selfishly absorbed in herself and in her own immediate concerns. But because she had a certain superficial good-nature, and, as she often said, because she was fond of seeing young people enjoying themselves, she had friends and defenders among those who viewed with distaste, and a certain cynical amusement, the determined efforts she made to secure husbands for her three daughters.

As so often happens, her efforts defeated their own object. The average Englishman has a peculiar horror of being caught by a match-maker, and the average man —Mrs. Segrave naturally dealt only with averages— makes it almost a point of honour not to be captured by such a one. Had the Misses Segrave been blessed with a mother who paid little or no attention to their settlement in life, they would almost certainly have all been wives ere now.

On this Tuesday afternoon Mrs. Segrave was in her full glory, and she looked at the scene spread out before her with much placid satisfaction. True, every one she had asked to her little tennis party had not come. Certain people, especially certain men in the neighbourhood,

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had not even shown her the courtesy of answering her kind invitation; and the man for whom she had given the party, that is, Richard Caryll, had at the last moment written her a civil note saying that he was prevented from coming.

But all the same she felt she had reason to be satisfied.

Dotted about the lawn of Newnham were five girls and five men. The fifth man, a clergyman and a widower, represented just that difference which lies between success and failure. Mrs. Segrave had a great dislike of what she called in her own mind "a hen party," and to her mind a hen party consisted of any party in which there are more women than men. To-day there were present her own three daughters, a young friend of theirs staying in the house, and Mary Pechell. And Mary—this added to Mrs. Segrave's satisfaction—could scarcely be accounted a girl, for though she was three or four years younger than the eldest Miss Segrave, she was engaged in some kind of queer work in London—she was in no sense a rival.

As for the men, there were two officers from the Dilchester Barracks; the ne'er-do-weel son of a local magnate; another young man who lived with his people within driving distance of Halkham, and who might, in certain circumstances, be regarded as eligible; and the clergyman. On him only did Mrs. Segrave look with doubtful eyes. He and her eldest daughter Violet, whom in her own mind she always called "the beauty," for Violet had been lovely, and was still exceedingly pretty, stood together, a little apart from the others.

Mrs. Segrave regarded this clergyman, whose name was Mr. Bateson, as "the last hope." In her active mind all the unmarried men she knew were ticketed. Mr. Bateson

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was "the last hope," because he was a widower with five children. He would have been better suited, though still only as a last hope, to Phyllis, the youngest and the only really plain Miss Segrave.

But strange to say, when one remembers the fact that he was a clergyman, Mr. Bateson preferred the beauty, and she seemed to return the preference; while Phyllis was apparently on terms of considerable amity with the very handsome ne'er-do-weel younger son of Lady Jane Porter, who had just been given a job on a tea-plantation in Ceylon. Mrs. Segrave did not regard Jim Porter as serious; he was one of the few, the very few, young men known to her whom she definitely refused to consider as a possible son-in-law.

It was a little after five o'clock. They had all had tea and were soon going to play again, when suddenly, from the house behind her, a servant appeared followed by two gentlemen. Mrs. Segrave's heart gave a leap—she was more than pleased, she was delighted.

"Mr. Caryll!" she exclaimed. "I thought you were not able to come? I'm so glad to see you!"

He smiled, and Richard Caryll had a very pleasant, attractive smile.

"My friend arrived by an earlier train than I expected, Mrs. Segrave. I've brought him with me—Major Jameson."

He sat down by her, and as he did so his observant grey eyes at once sought and found a figure he was looking for.

He could hardly have told which three out of the five young ladies who were there before him were the daughters

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of the house. To him the Misses Segrave were all, in spite of what Lady Susan had said, practically undistinguishable the one from the other. But he did notice how very different they all looked from Mary Pechell. For one thing, they were far more smartly dressed. Her plain white serge coat and skirt were to his eyes very becoming, but he guessed that it had not been put on with any thought to please. Miss Pechell had none of her Aunt Rose's love of pretty clothes.

"Violet, my dear," Mrs. Segrave scarcely raised her voice, but her eldest daughter heard the call, and after a moment's hesitation, left Mr. Bateson's side.

Major Jameson looked up and his eyes brightened. This was a very pretty woman who was coming towards the tea-table; he was a little disappointed when she was introduced to him as "Miss Segrave."

"Violet, will you take Mr. Caryll to see those new climbers of which we were telling him the other day?"

Richard Caryll got up. Together he and Violet Segrave obediently strolled off together, leaving Mrs. Segrave and Major Jameson alone.

These two were made to understand one another; in fact there were curious points of similarity between Mrs. Segrave and Major Jameson. Both were, so to speak, out for the best that this material life can offer its devotees. Already her busy mind was speculating as to who he was, where he came from, to which of the various Jamesons she had met, he belonged. She had very little doubt he was a bachelor—bachelor, so she told herself with satisfaction, was written all over him.

As for Major Jameson, he was thoroughly enjoying

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his stay in Sussex. He congratulated himself on having had the sense to write and propose himself as a visitor to the new owner of Highways. He had heard men say they couldn't get on with Caryll, but he had always hit it off with him splendidly.

Almost as though she read his thoughts, Mrs. Segrave turned and spoke to him. "What a very nice man your friend Mr. Caryll is!" she exclaimed cordially.

"Yes, isn't he a good chap?"

"Have you known him a long time?" she asked.

"Well, I've known him some time. He and I travelled from Australia together last year."

"He must be very well off," she said musingly.

"Yes, I expect he is—and a generous chap too," said Jameson cheerfully. "From something he once said I gather his people used to belong to this part of the world."

"I never heard that," said Mrs. Segrave quickly. "I took some trouble to find that out when Mr. Caryll first came here, for, of course, one likes to know who a man is."

Mrs. Segrave's eyes were wandering, and a look of annoyance came into them. Richard Caryll had left her Violet's side; he was now standing by Mary Pechell, talking to her very earnestly.

It was odd, or so Mrs. Segrave thought, that Mary Pechell generally did absorb the most interesting man present. And the more strange because, as far as one could see, she made no effort to secure this advantage to herself. The last time it had occurred at Newnham the man had been John Ryman. He had talked to Mary almost the whole time his call on Mrs. Segrave had lasted. Indeed, he had been positively rude, for when Mary had risen to

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go he had insisted on going too! But then John Ryman, so Mrs. Segrave now reminded herself, was a disagreeable man. She had given him up as a bad job, almost from his first coming into the neighbourhood.

There had been a moment, a moment which had lasted some three months, when she had hoped that he and her youngest girl, Phyllis, might take a fancy to one another. But very soon she had had the sense to see there was no chance of that. John Ryman, so much was clear, intended to wait for Lady Susan's death, and then marry some smart London girl.

Though not an unkind woman, Mrs. Segrave couldn't help hoping that this mythical Mrs. John Ryman would make John Ryman very uncomfortable! To her mind there was something so hard and disagreeable about him. He was generally coldly civil to herself; but that was the most you could say of him. And it was an open secret that he was anything but kind to dear old Lady Susan; in fact he neglected his aunt shamefully. Sometimes many weeks went by without his coming near the place. . . .

Men who know their own mind to the same extent that Richard Caryll knew his generally managed to compass their desires. He had come to Mrs. Segrave's tennis party to meet Mary Pechell, and to make to her a certain suggestion about the person he had overheard her discussing with her aunts.

Her first words gave him the opening he had thought it would be difficult to find.

"I left Aunt Alice talking to Mrs. Ryal," she said smiling, sure somehow of his sympathy and understanding. "She is very angry, Mr. Caryll, because the poor woman

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won't or can't conceal her joy that her husband took something from the till and so got his excellent place with you!"

"I'm sending Ryal away," he said quietly, "to make a new start in Australia. I agree, in the main, with your aunt, Miss Pechell. He who breaks must pay."

"I—I suppose so," she said hesitatingly.

"I go further. I say he who breaks does pay—almost invariably."

And then he hurried on.

"But I have heard of some one else who has got into much the same kind of trouble as Ryal. Some one you seemed to think wanted a change—a holiday. Now I want you to let me have that man at Highways! After Major Jameson has gone I shall be quite alone for nearly a month. I think I can promise you to make the poor fellow comfortable, and put him in heart again."

Mary Pechell felt a sudden thrill of gratitude. She did not remember having spoken of the matter on the day Mr. Caryll paid his long, pleasant call, but doubtless Miss Rose, who never kept anything to herself, had said something of the matter to him. Perhaps kind Aunt Rose's conscience had pricked her a little for her lack of sympathy.

"It's very good of you," she said frankly. "But wouldn't it be an awful bore?"

"Not as much of a bore to me as it would have been to your aunts."

"Oh, but I should have been there," she said quickly. "You see, I could have looked after him."

"Perhaps you will allow me to bring him over some time? Between us both we could see that he left the

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silver alone——"; his eyes laughed at hers, and she felt a pang of vexation. It was really too bad of Aunt Rose!

"It's tremendously kind of you," she said again, then hesitated. Somehow she did not like putting his burden on a complete stranger. "You know," she said, and then she stopped again. "Perhaps I ought to tell you that the poor fellow is not—is hardly what you, Mr. Caryll, would call a gentleman; in fact, he belongs to that most melancholy class, the betwixts and betweens. I believe his parents were of gentle birth, but they do not seem to have been able to give him any sort of decent education."

"I thought as much," said Caryll in a low voice. "Poor wretch—poor unhappy wretch!" He spoke in a tone of comprehension and sympathy that surprised Mary Pechell.

"It is very good of you to understand," she said in a low voice. "So very few people do understand that sort of case! My aunts, who are so kind, so extraordinarily kind, did not understand at all——" She waited a moment, and then, looking at him, said thoughtfully, "I suppose that in the Colonies one comes across a great many men of that sort, Mr. Caryll?"

"Yes, but by the time they get there they are often too far gone to be worth reclaiming." And as he saw a look of distress come over her face, "I'm sure you agree with me that prevention is better than cure. I think that between us both we shall be able to give this poor young man a shove up, instead of a shove down, Miss Pechell."

"Then I'll write by to-night's post. When could you have him?"

"By the end of this week," he said. "But—forgive me

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for saying so—why should you take all that trouble? If you don't mind sending me over the address of the person I'm to write to, and any other particulars you think I ought to know, I will do all the business side of it myself."

She felt touched and grateful—more touched and grateful perhaps than the service he was about to render her warranted. But Mary Pechell was so much used to bearing the burdens which kindnesses lay on their doers.

And then he left her—and a moment later Mrs. Segrave enjoyed the satisfaction of seeing Mr. Caryll paying special attention to her second girl, Lily, who, if only Violet were safely married and out of the way, would certainly have become "the pretty Miss Segrave," for she was very pretty, though not, unfortunately, as pretty as Violet had been, or, for the matter of that, as Violet was.

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CHAPTER VII

It was the Friday following Mrs. Segrave's tennis party, and Richard Caryll, standing in the comfortable smoking-room he had made out of what had been the old farm kitchen, looked round him with a feeling of deep, silent satisfaction.

Major Jameson had at last taken off his dapper little self. He had gone on staying at Highways from day to day—making friends with the workmen and gardeners as well as with the people Caryll knew in the neighbourhood, and, as he constantly assured his silent, rather abstracted host, enjoying every moment of the time.

It was thanks to Major Jameson that two or three of Caryll's neighbours whom he had wished to know had come into contact with the new owner of Highways, for the cheery bachelor had an immense circle. Indeed, it was difficult to mention any man or woman of note with whom Major Jameson was not ready to claim acquaintance, and he was, as that sort of people always are, eager to add to his circle of agreeable and well-to-do friends.

In the abstract Caryll found Jameson interesting and enviable, but in practice he was a wearisome guest, for his interests were purely social, and everything in the life he led—sport, games, politics—was only important to him as bearing on his own relation to society.

Major Jameson was the typical visitor who plays so great a rôle in hospitable Britain. He was the happy, idle

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man who thinks he knows that a dozen hosts are ever eager to entertain him, or, if that is not quite true, then that a dozen hosts can be made to believe that they are anxious to entertain him, his own confident belief that this is so being curiously infectious.

He had made, or so he thought, great friends with Lady Susan Baliol, but on the only occasion Caryll had managed to escape alone to Halkham House, the old lady had observed, "If you're not careful, my good friend, Major Jameson will stay on with you the best part of the summer, and whenever nothing better offers you will find him making Highways his home!"

"I don't think he finds Highways as attractive as all that comes to!" Caryll had answered with a smile.

Lady Susan had, however, been right in her shrewd and not very kindly summing up of Major Jameson's character. He would have far outstayed his welcome at Highways but for the fact that a chance word let drop by his host informed him that another visitor was expected—and one the Major would on no account have consented to meet.

"A man who's been in prison! My dear chap, isn't that rather *too* altruistic, eh, what?"

"I don't suppose he's any worse than other people," Caryll said indifferently. But he threw a quick, sharp glance at the other's good-natured face.

Major Jameson always spoke with large, easy toleration of people who had got into trouble. He had an intimate knowledge of society's black sheep and ne'er-do-weels, and his kindly way of talking of such "poor devils," and of women "more sinned against than sinning, don't

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you know!" had been the one of his conversational peculiarities which had first attracted Caryll when the two men were thrown together during the enforced intimacy of a long sea voyage.

When this conversation took place, they were sitting opposite one another in the small room, formerly the farmhouse parlour, which Richard Caryll had had fitted up as a dining-room, and which was quite large enough for the little use he was ever likely to make of it before that portion of the castle he was intent on restoring was ready for his occupation.

"No doubt you're right—I'm not saying anything against the poor fellow, but still—a gaol bird, eh? D'you think it's a wise thing to have him here? Those sort of chaps are apt to stick to one like burrs, particularly if they haven't anybody else to turn to! I thought there was some society or other that dealt with that sort of case—The Discharged Prisoners' Aid, eh?"

"No society can deal with such a case as this," said Caryll shortly. "You see, the man's by way of being a gentleman. He came of decent people—at least so I understand."

"Oh, but that's worse and worse," said Jameson briskly.

In his eagerness he put down his knife and fork and forgot for the moment an excellent breakfast.

"I once knew a rotter like that—not well, you understand, but he'd been in the regiment"—Major Jameson had retained a very soft spot for the regiment in his worldly, superficially kind heart. "Just lived on his wits—that's what the fellow got to do at last, after he had come out of prison. Swindled some people I knew—Oh, it was

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a bad case, very bad! They say that prison generally has that effect on a man."

"I expect that's true," said Caryll slowly.

He was eating steadily, not looking over at the guest, out of whose shrewd, smiling face all the cheer had died, for Major Jameson had no wish to leave Highways this week.

Caryll went on: "It's odd that the punishment should injure a character more than the actual crime committed seems to do."

"Well, I wouldn't put it just that way—must have punishments, you know! Who breaks—pays. It's always well to bear that in mind."

"It's a good rule of thumb to live by," said Caryll composedly. "But still it isn't true—in fact it's just because it isn't true that theologians invented hell. They knew perfectly well that one can break the whole time and never pay at all this side death!"

"Death?" Major Jameson looked uncomfortably at his host. If he could help it, he, Jameson, never thought of death. He was far more afraid of death than of judgment. Speaking from his own limited experience, he thought it certain that he who breaks—and by breaking he meant making love too hotly to your host's pretty wife, cheating at cards, or being in a general way "unsportsmanlike"—almost invariably pays a heavy toll. He had noticed it again and again. What a queer chap this man Caryll was!

"And how long is your unlucky gaol-bird going to perch here?" he asked abruptly.

"Just as long as he likes," said Caryll carelessly. "I

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shan't be in any hurry to get rid of him. A friend of mine has got him a job—all he wants is a good holiday first."

"But Caryll—I say? You're not going to introduce him to the people about here, eh?"

Caryll hesitated reflectively.

"Well, no, I suppose not," he said at last. "There's one house that will be open to him—that of the Misses Charnwood. They knew about him already."

"He won't hurt those two old girls," Major Jameson chuckled. "But what about the niece, Caryll? Miss Pechell? Nice girl, that! I know some of her people in Suffolk. Her father was a younger son of Sir William Pechell of Giffards. I don't think you're right to take a man of the sort you describe, specially not if he's a gentleman, where there's a charming person like Miss Pechell! Just think if he fell in love with her, or she with him! There'd be a tragedy for you! Why, I knew a girl—the dearest little girl in the world—who fell in love with a man who called himself Count Alberto something-or-other. Well, he was a valet in disguise! What d'you think of that? It was only found out just in time, three days before the wedding!"

"Then you think a man who's done anything he's ashamed of should never marry?" and at last Caryll looked up and straight across the oval table. "You think he should put all thought of that sort of thing away."

"Good God, no! I'm not such a fool as that! I don't say that only saints should marry." Major Jameson stared at his host. He wondered if Caryll could be serious. "But I'd be sorry for any woman who married a man who'd been in prison; and if I liked her and, well—was friendly

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with her people, I'd move Heaven and earth to prevent it," the little man summed up stoutly.

"But you wouldn't feel that, Jameson, about a man who hadn't been found out?"

"The eleventh Commandment, eh, what? 'Thou shalt not be found out,'" quoted Jameson, laughing a little uncomfortably.

The conversation was beginning to bother him. It was too bad of Caryll to have sprung such a jar on him. If a gaol-bird was really coming here to Highways to-morrow, then he, Gerry Jameson, must make himself scarce. He wasn't going to be mixed up with a man who had been in prison. It wasn't good enough! That sort of acquaintance, however slight, could only lead to some bother, and Major Jameson's time was spent in avoiding bothers. Caryll was a good-natured fellow—a thoroughly good-hearted chap, but it would be just as well if some one gave him a hint not to waste himself and his substance on rotters, when there were so many deserving people in the world.

"I don't say you're not a good Samaritan," he resumed, "and I admire you for it. 'Pon my word I do! But this time I'm going to play the Pharisee, and pass by on the other side! I'll be off to-morrow morning, if you don't mind. But look here, Caryll, I'll give you a sovereign for the poor chap."

"There's no necessity for that," said Caryll, smiling a rather bitter smile. "He's not in any need of money, I assure you. All he wants is a leg-up on to the normal platform on which ordinary people live. That's what my friend wants me to give him."

"You're too damned good-natured!" said Jameson, also

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smiling rather ruefully. "But you haven't been bit yet. When you've been bit you'll shy, too!"

And this was why Caryll now stood alone in his smoking-room, looking round him with a pleasant sense of being again his own master, and this although he was actually expecting at any moment the guest from whose contaminating presence Major Jameson had fled.

At last he went over to a narrow oak table on which lay open what looked like a shabby old copy-book. Bending down, he began studying with close care the lines of faded handwriting covering the yellow sheets of paper. Just now this old book was Caryll's most precious possession, for it contained a list of the furniture and other household plenishings which had been saved from Highways Castle during the fire.

He had told Mary Pechell that he would invent work for his coming guest. Well, there would be no need to do that. He could give him this list to copy.

In the old furniture and curiosity mart—that mart which has taken such a surprising extension in the last twenty years—the name of Mr. Caryll of Highways was becoming known as that of an excellent and respected customer; respected because, although he was a generous, even a reckless, buyer when a thing seized his fancy or satisfied his taste, it had been found impossible to pass off on him either pretty rubbish or made-up pieces.

By one of those happy accidents which all collectors know, he had been offered a list of all that had been saved at Highways at the time of the great fire seventy years before, and he had allowed it to be known far and wide that

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he wished to reconstitute, so far as was possible in every particular, the Highways Castle of a hundred years ago. But in the seventy years there had come a complete dispersion of all the last Lord Wolferstan's possessions, to say nothing of the household plenishings of the castle.

Caryll relics had wandered far afield, and the new owner of Highways was always receiving photographs and descriptions of pieces of furniture from Scotland and Ireland, as well as London. For any object which could without doubt be identified as having once been in the old Sussex stronghold its new owner was ready, nay eager, to pay a handsome price. But he was not easy to cajole or convince. Had he been so, there would soon have sprung up a manufactory of Highways relics and portraits. Unfortunately for those who deal in such things, Richard Caryll was always cool and cautious and disconcertingly ready to reject with absolute decision any article offered to him about which there could be serious doubt.

The room in which he was now awaiting his visitors contained furniture which had formerly been in the servants' quarters of the castle. Each of the substantial walnutwood Jacobean chairs had found a temporary home in cottages and small farmhouses within a few miles' radius of Highways, and the narrow oak table, now placed across the end of his smoking-room, had been, according to local tradition, the carving table of the castle kitchen.

It had been arranged between Mary Pechell and himself that she and one of her aunts should meet Harold Donkins and drive him up to Highways, thus softening any little awkwardness the two men might feel at first meeting one another.

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Caryll walked over to one of the windows of the farm-house, and gazed down on the great view with an exultant feeling of ownership, of oneness with the beauty of it.

Bounded only by the deep blue strip of sea which lay along the horizon to the south, a great sweep of country lay unrolled before him. In the foreground, below the apex of the hill on which the old castle had been built, wound ribbon-wise, cut out of the chalk, the road by which his guests must come. Down there, across the tiny bare white space marked by a solitary barn and a small pond which now gleamed in the bright sunlight, visitors to Highways were bound to pass. There was no other way, save through the impenetrable, almost pathless, primeval wood, a corner of the Forest of Anderida, crossed by Cæsar when he first came from Gaul, which still stretches from end to end of the South Downs.

A discussion—quite an anxious discussion—had arisen between himself and his housekeeper as to where tea should be served, and it was in deference to her feminine advice that he had assented to its being laid, cottage fashion, in the little dining-room.

The housekeeper had been surprised when her master had told her to put out certain armorial cups and saucers which, when they had come from the oldest and most reputable of the Dilchester curiosity shops, she had been told were to be for show, not use.

They were part of a set which had certainly been in use at Highways a hundred years ago. Now, in honour of Miss Rose Charnwood and of Mary Pechell, these old cups and saucers, doubtless last used by Caryll's great-grand-

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mother, were set out and were to serve guests of Highways once more.

There were only eight cups and saucers and a few plates, each quaintly embellished with the old Caryll coat-of-arms.

Caryll took up one of the cups and looked at it with mingled feelings of bitterness and pride. As a little boy he had always used for his milk a mug with this coat embossed upon it, and he remembered a word or two which had been said in front of him by his nurse and a fellow-servant.

"No right to it?" the nurse, his almost foster-mother, had said fiercely. "Don't you dare to say such a thing! Of course Master Dick has a perfect right to it. What's law compared to nature?" But though "Master Dick" had not in the least understood what the quarrel was about, he had felt hurt and uncomfortable, aware, as children are almost always aware of such things, that his dear, kind, loyal nurse had been wrong, the younger woman right. . . .

Caryll put the cup down. What a strange, bitter thing is memory. He had not thought of that trifling incident for years, and now it came to mock him on what he had determined should be a cloudless, memorable day—memorable because it was to bring for the first time Mary Pechell to his dwelling-place.

It was Miss Rose who had first told him of her niece's connexion with the Home Workers, and with the energy and thoroughness characteristic of the man, Caryll had at once written to London and obtained all the papers of the Society. They were now locked up in his desk; but

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before putting them away he had read them very carefully, touched and a little amused as he did so.

"Honorary Secretary: Miss Mary Pechell." She was not even paid—that again was odd, odd to such a man as himself, who had always associated work with pay, and with the drudgery of money-making.

Yet another thing was odd, and touched him queerly. Miss Pechell was fighting on a losing side. The day of the individualist is over, or so at least Caryll felt convinced. Every Act of Parliament presses the "home-worker" closer and closer to the wall.

Yes; these rather badly printed pamphlets and leaflets had interested him very much. Those poor people fighting for their right to make their starvation living as they preferred to make it, in silence and in secrecy, were doomed. Well, they had a gallant maid to lead and shepherd them on their toilsome way. He wondered if it would hurt her feelings were he to suggest that some members of her forlorn band might begin new and infinitely happier lives beyond the sea in any one of the greater Englands. This little England, or so Caryll felt quite convinced, is only good for those who are born, or have become, prosperous.

There were the names of very distinguished men and women connected with the losing fight. Caryll wondered to which of the men who championed the cause of the Home Worker had Miss Pechell been bespoke—an odd word to use, but Lady Susan used odd words.

Caryll knew very little of English ways—nothing of the unspoken laws which govern marriage and the giving in marriage of what was now his class. But even he real-

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ized that there must be something slightly unusual in an engagement which was never mentioned. Miss Pechell, however, was unlike any other girl he had ever seen.

He had managed to escape from Major Jameson for an hour yesterday afternoon, and by what he felt to be a singular good fortune he and Mary had had a talk alone. But this had only made him the more eager to see her again.

She had not been to Highways since she was a child. Last time she had been there—so she had told him—it had been a desolate place, the farmhouse uninhabited. He wondered what she would think of the changes he had made, of the greater changes he was about to make.

The new owner of Highways had only known Miss Pechell a few days, and yet somehow her opinion already counted with him, and counted a good deal.

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CHAPTER VIII

After seeing that everything was ready in the little dining-room, Caryll went back to the window where he had stood before, and then, in a moment, his face clouded.

He saw that Miss Rose sat in the little pony-carriage alone, the gardener's boy who served as groom perched behind; and to the left, much farther down, Mary Pechell and the man whom she and her aunt had brought from the station were walking up the hill, making their way across the steep, sloping fields. Miss Pechell's coat and skirt and shady hat showed a splash of soft whiteness against the browns and greens.

Caryll longed to hurry down and meet her, but his old-fashioned, strict code of courtesy made it impossible for him to leave his house just as Miss Rose Charnwood was about to enter it.

He was glad that it was Miss Rose and not Miss Alice who was coming to-day to Highways. He always felt at ease with the younger sister, far more so than with the elder, whose favourite he was. To the masculine mind there was something disarming, appealing, and even now attractive, in the younger Miss Charnwood. . . .

There came the sound of wheels, of horse's hoofs on the brick pavement which formed a platform in front of the farm buildings, and Richard Caryll, flinging open the low, nail-studded door, went out to greet his guest.

There are certain people—they are becoming rare in the

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eager, impatient, egoistic times we live in—who bring with them an atmosphere of serenity and peace. In their society lovers and children are at ease. To the careless, the indifferent, the artificial, such people, perhaps one should say such women, seem over-placid, but that is only because the springs of their feelings go down very deep and flow concealed, as far as may be, from themselves.

Rose Charnwood, when allowed by her masterful sister to be herself, was one of those rare and always beloved human beings, and yet how surprised would those who paid her unconscious tribute have been if they had been told of hers and their good fortune!

Years had gone by since Miss Rose had been to Highways, and the last time it had been to read the Bible to the dying wife of the old farmer. But she did not confide this rather mournful reminiscence to her host; instead she contented herself with admiring the changes he had made, and with saying a word of sincere and rather timid and embarrassed gratitude for his kindness in taking in Mary Pechell's protégé. About Harold Donkins, Miss Rose's conscience had been ill at ease, and she felt the more grateful to Richard Caryll.

Even in the height of summer Miss Rose, by her sister's orders, was always over-warmly dressed when driving. It was a survival of the days when the younger Miss Charnwood was feared to be in that mysterious early Victorian malady, a "decline." So Caryll called the housekeeper to assist his guest to unwrap, and while the two were talking—Miss Rose with the gentle, kindly babble he was learning to know so well—he again went to the door.

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Yes, there were the two for whom he was waiting so eagerly—the man he wished to succour, the woman whom he had already begun to feel could alone succour him in his restless unease.

Miss Pechell was talking eagerly, her fine face aglow, but the young man walking by her side did not look at her, he simply kept pace with downcast eyes and hanging head.

Poor Harold Donkins was out of condition; he looked very hot, as well as tired and ill at ease. Caryll felt a quick feeling of recoil, of pity, of impatience. It would not be easy to deal with this apathetic, irresolute creature. No wonder the young fellow had been made a tool of by one cleverer than himself.

During a considerable part of his life Caryll had held the reasoned view that certain men are born to be the dupes, the cat's-paw, of those more gifted than themselves. He had once acted on that view. But even then some queer, inherent streak of generosity in his nature had caused him to try and save his victim. And, more fortunate than the majority of those who try to avert the consequences of their evil deeds, he had been successful.

But shame has about it a curiously enduring quality. Of all stains it is the hardest to obliterate. Richard Caryll, face to face with poor, foolish, victimized Harold Donkins, felt a wave of hot, acrid shame sweep over him.

What would Mary Pechell think of him if she knew even part of the truth? Caryll was aware that to the great majority of people that old episode in his life, that using of another as cat's-paw, which made him feel this sudden sick feeling of shame and humiliation, would have seemed

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the least of his misdoings, but as to such a matter instinct told him that the woman who was now looking at him with a frank, grateful glance of friendship would feel exactly as he felt.

Fortunately Mary Pechell would never know. He reminded himself fiercely that very few men and women could face without quailing, in the presence of their friends, the Great Assize.

As the two men met, Donkins's limp, moist hand rested for a moment in the hand of his host, and then drawing himself away he stammered a word of awkward thanks for the hospitality about to be extended to him.

Miss Pechell had turned away when the two men were greeting one another. She walked to the edge of the platform, and gazed down and out over the great expanse. After a moment's hesitation Caryll followed her.

"How heavenly beautiful it is!" she exclaimed. And then, seeing that the man she had brought with her was still standing where Caryll had greeted him, she added in a low voice, "Think what it will be to him, poor fellow, to be here after all he has gone through! I don't suppose he has ever seen anything like this in his life."

Caryll brushed away the cynical suspicion that to Harold Donkins the scenery of the humblest London music-hall or theatre would have been incomparably more interesting, more stimulating, than the magnificent prospect which now lay behind him.

But as if Mary Pechell had divined something of the feeling with which Caryll had greeted her words, she exclaimed impulsively, "Believe me, there is something good and refined about him, Mr. Caryll! All the same, I'm

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afraid that you'll find him a great burden. If he's difficult to manage, if he seems dull—you won't misunderstand me —send him down to the Little House."

He nodded his head gravely, and she felt a sudden sense of relief. It was very seldom that any one understood her, sympathized with her point of view, as quickly as Richard Caryll understood and sympathized.

And then they all walked into the farmhouse. And at once Miss Rose resumed with her niece's protégé what had been the thread of a conversation begun by her in the pony-carriage; and her gentle voice, her innocent babble, drew a timorous response, at last even a smile, from Harold Donkins.

This was the first time since he had left prison that he was being treated like an ordinary human being, the first time that those about him were not looking at him either with pitiful or with scornful eyes.

The hour that followed did not pass as pleasantly as Caryll had expected. All unknowingly to himself, he had come to that danger point in his friendship with Mary Pechell when a man longs to be alone with the woman who has become his friend, and when the presence of others fills him with unease, almost with discomfort.

Miss Rose and Harold Donkins were by no means encumbering presences, but they were there, and their host was compelled to address a good deal of his conversation to the elder lady.

When they had gone into the dining-room he had manœuvred Mary Pechell with a few cleverly-chosen words which immediately had their effect on the simple Rose Charnwood, into the place of honour; and so it was

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Miss Pechell who poured out Caryll's tea into the goblet-shaped armorial cups by which the new owner of Highways set such store.

But as she sat there a terrible sense of desolateness swept over Richard Caryll. Long days, long months, long solitary years stretched before him in a sombre perspective. With astonishment he realized that during the last fortnight he had become, from a man perfectly content with all the conditions of his life, a man profoundly dissatisfied.

At last there came the chance for which he had been longing ever since he had first known that the aunt and niece were coming to Highways to-day. And it was Miss Rose who gave it him.

"I wish Alice was here. She is so interested in your plans of restoring the castle——"

"There is nothing to see yet, for I have done practically nothing. But Miss Charnwood raised a point the other day which greatly interested me. She thinks a number of rooms were added late in the eighteenth century. No trace of this building remains, but I thought I would like to show Miss Pechell the place, and ask her what she thinks. I don't ask you to come, Miss Rose, for it's over rather rough ground."

And again Miss Rose at once fell into his clumsily-laid trap. "I think I should prefer to stay here with Mr. Donkins," she said quietly.

But it was not the rough ground which deterred Rose Charnwood. She had suddenly remembered a long and solitary walk she had taken with her lover, Alick Stair, up to the old ruins. They had clambered about, full of high

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spirits and the ecstatic joy of life. It had been one of her last happy days.

And thus it came to pass that Richard Caryll and Mary Pechell found themselves out of doors, and alone.

Before them all that remained of what had been Highways Castle rose in sharp, fantastic outline against the pale blue sky, and the irregular jagged masses of grey stone gave a strange, eerie impression of desolateness and pathos to what would have been, had no human dwelling ever occupied the site, so noble a scene of natural beauty.

"Not the slow, kindly hand of time, but cruel man gave me those gaping wounds"—so the wraith of the once gallant stronghold seemed to say to Mary Pechell as she breasted the sharply rising slopes, now covered with low-growing, tenacious brambles and brushwood, leading to what had been, if on a miniature scale, one of the most perfect examples of a mediæval keep in Southern England. All that now remained were two masses of broken stone and brickwork meeting each side of the low pointed arch of the gateway to which Caryll was turning his own and his companion's footsteps.

He was grateful to her for her silence. Only once—only the first time he had come solitary to Highways, on a cold March day in the previous winter, had he felt moved as he felt moved now.

Unknowingly to himself he quickened his steps, and Mary Pechell had some ado to keep up with him.

But she, too, unwittingly affected by the atmosphere of strong feeling, of exultation, in which she found herself, felt touched by the melancholy, solitary beauty of the

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place, and by its sombre, romantic associations. Instinctively her eyes sought for traces of the great fire—but ignorant vandalism, and the cupidity of the more lawless inhabitants of the villages near by who had for long considered Highways as a free quarry open to all those who had the strength to roll the huge stones down the hill, had destroyed the shell which fierce flames had left intact.

Soon they were close to the two high, grass-grown steps which gave access to the keep, and then something happened which was destined to remain forever in both their emotional memories.

Caryll, striding on in front of her, leapt up the two huge stones, and then, standing just under the centre of the pointed arch, he held out both his hands, and Mary Pechell, after a moment of scarcely perceptible hesitation, held out hers—so was she brought up and over what had long been the threshold of Highways Castle.

But the moment she was within the circle of ruined walls the strong, tenacious grasp of her companion relaxed, and Caryll, his face gone a little white under the sunburn, stood well away from her.

"They were to have begun clearing this space yesterday," he said, "but I wanted you to see the keep as it has been for the last fifty years."

"Surely the fire took place longer ago than that?"

Mary Pechell scarcely knew what she was saying. There had been a moment when she had thought Caryll was drawing her up into his arms, and she had felt she was yielding more of herself than she had ever thought to do to any human being. . . .

And now she was full of retrospective shame that such

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a thought—such a wild impossibility—should have come into her mind.

But what was this he was saying?

"The fire took place nearly eighty years ago, and for long after the castle was left derelict. It was not fire which caused all this mischief!" He looked round him with regretful eyes. "The keep was almost—I do not say quite—untouched. It was the portion of the castle where were the living-rooms of my—of the last Lord Wolferstan—which were destroyed, and to which, as you of course know, he deliberately set fire."

"What an extraordinarily savage being he must have been!" said Mary slowly. She had first heard the story—bowdlerized by Miss Charnwood—in her childhood, and not long before, in fact while talking about the purchase of Highways by Richard Caryll, the truth had been told her by Lady Susan.

Now, standing in this desolate spot, the awful destruction wrought by the last owner of Highways became very real, and had drawn from her that almost involuntary exclamation.

She was now recovering her usual rather proud serenity of manner, and yet even so she avoided looking into the eyes which had seemed to be so imploring, so beckoning, in the long moment that their owner had grasped her hands.

"Savage?" repeated Caryll. "Nay, surely not! Would you give the body of one you loved as Lord Wolferstan loved his"—he waited a moment, then concluded his sentence "his—poor dead lady to her most ruthless enemy?"

"I—I suppose not."

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"The man who was standing on the letter of his rights—I mean her husband—you know the story?——"

Mary nodded.

"——had made her children"—again Caryll broke short, and then in substitution for the short plain noun he had meant to use he uttered the word "nameless." "Can you wonder, Miss Pechell, that the man who loved her—whom she loved—was willing to do anything to balk his enemy's strange and cruel wish?"

Mary made no reply. Again she felt inexplicably moved by, and drawn to, this man who was still a stranger to her. "He not only sympathizes with what was done here," she said to herself, "but given the circumstances he would have done the same thing himself!"

They walked in silence across to a gaping cleft in the thick wall. There, framed in stone, lay the vast view, bathed in late afternoon sunlight.

But Caryll's companion uttered no exclamation of admiration or delight; almost for the first time in her life Mary Pechell felt shy and ill at ease.

Richard Caryll, vibrating with what was to him an enchanting sense of nearness, divined nothing of this. He was shaken with a wild longing to tell her some of the truth about himself. But he was afraid. He knew her as yet too little to judge how it would affect what he still believed to be their friendship. And then a word said by her suddenly made him feel that he might—that he must—take the risk.

"I wonder you chose to come here," she said thoughtfully, "when you had all England to choose from. Highways must harbour such sad, to you such alien, ghosts!"

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"Not alien to me, Miss Pechell. With each of the Highways' ghosts I can claim kinship. I am not an interloper here," he said slowly, deliberately. "I am one of the two last living descendants of the man who burnt Highways."

"Of Lord Wolferstan?"

"Yes. He was my great-grandfather. And all my life long, since I was quite a little child, Highways has been my house of dreams. During the years I lived in exile, working harder than most men work, Miss Pechell, I had only one end in view—that of spending some of my life here!"

He spoke with extraordinary if suppressed passion, and Mary felt a strange tremor go through her. She longed to go up close to him, to still—as some obscure instinct told her she could do—his almost painful passion of feeling.

"How wonderful it must be to feel you have accomplished your wish!" she said. "So very few people—at least so I always think—are able to do in life what they set out to do."

He threw a searching look at her. During the last few days, much of his satisfaction, of his sense of achievement, had fallen away from him.

"Yes," he said, in a constrained voice, "I suppose I've been extremely fortunate, more fortunate than most men are. But it is not good for the character to set one's heart on a wish as I set mine. It filled my boyhood with bitterness, with rage, with envy."

"With rage and envy?" repeated Mary surprised.

"Yes, and with intense bitterness. You must remember that but for an accident I should be——"

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And then there came to her in a flash the meaning of what he had stopped short of saying. No wonder he had spoken as he had done of the last Lord Wolferstan's enemy! But for the staying of that man's hand, Richard Caryll would now be Earl of Wolferstan, and in place of this ruin there would be a dwelling full of happy memories.

"The facts," he went on, "could not be concealed from me. But I never heard it in any detail till I was told it by Lady Susan Baliol—I mean the story of the fire. I had imagined something so different." He waited a moment. "Shall I tell you what I imagined?"

Mary nodded.

"You will think me a great fool! But some time after I left England a curious book fell into my hands. It purported to be a novel, but I made up my mind that it was the true story of my grandfather. In this story, which was told in the first person, the hero, situated as Lord Wolferstan's unfortunate son was situated, went back to what had been his father's house—his father according to nature, not according to law. He crept in—it is still all as real to me as if I had seen it happen—and when the whole household was asleep (I must tell you that the tale was placed in the eighteenth century) he went up to his kinsman's room, killed him, and then, after a brief hour of the joys of ownership, he set the house which should have been his from birth upwards on fire. It was a crude story, full, of course, of improbabilities and impossibilities; but I took it into my head—young fool that I was—that the writer had heard the true story of Highways. and so written it down."

"What a strange, terrible story," murmured Mary.

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But Caryll went on as though he had not heard her interruption.

"When I came back to England—when I discovered that Highways was actually for sale, I—I felt awed by my good fortune. That night I walked the streets of London for hours. 'Highways is mine! Highways is mine!' I kept saying to myself. Indeed, I believe I must have said it aloud, for more than once strangers turned and stared as if I had addressed them. Some one else wanted to buy the place"—a shadow crossed his face. "I fancy Lady Susan is ignorant of the fact that her nephew, Mr. Ryman, wished to be owner of Highways. I don't quite know why he wished it. He is certain, I suppose, to inherit the Halkham estates."

And then Mary Pechell's face also shadowed.

"Are you sure of what you say? I mean was it certainly John Ryman?"

"Quite sure; though he made a great mystery of the matter. He boggled at the price—fortunately for me, for I would have gone up to any price. I would have bought the place even if the fact of buying it had not left me enough money to do what I wished to do—restore the castle to the condition in which it was when my great-grandparents lived here."

"Hadn't Lord Wolferstan some estate that went to his mother's family?" said Mary questioningly.

"Yes, a big place in Warwickshire. But though he sometimes went there, he does not seem ever to have lived in it. No, no, Highways was the place from which the Carylls sprang—long before there was a Lord Wolferstan in Warwickshire, there were Carylls at Highways."

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"And now," said Mary, smiling with kind eyes, "it is good to know that there is again a Caryll at Highways! But you spoke of another descendant—have you a brother?"

It was a natural question, but it took him aback.

"Did I say so? Well, it's true. But I have no brother. I was an only child, Miss Pechell. My father had a sister, who is still living. She of course is a granddaughter of Lord Wolferstan. My father died many years ago, when I was twelve years old."

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CHAPTER IX

That half-hour—nay, was it as much as half an hour?—spent by them together amid the ruins of Highways Castle established a very real if unacknowledged intimacy between Richard Caryll and Mary Pechell. During the days that followed, when their only outward bond was the young man whom she wished to befriend, she could not forget that she knew Caryll's secret, and the sharing of a secret is in itself a bond between a man and woman.

Lady Susan had been right as to her new friend's relations to her sex. He had always known how to please and to subdue women to his will. But during the twenty years his wanderings had lasted he had made one rule—and kept it. Rigidly had he avoided any intimacies with unmarried women. But here, in safeguarded, conventional England, the conditions of life were all different. Besides, Miss Pechell, from the first moment of their meeting, had been placed on a pinnacle apart, in his mind, from other members of her sex.

He found himself constantly thinking of her, not so much in relation to himself as in relation to other people. Lady Susan had said that Miss Pechell was bespoke—and Caryll, while trying to get on to some sort of common platform with young Donkins, would find himself wondering to whom. In those early days he still tried to think of Mary Pechell as married to some honest country gentle-

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man with whom he, the solitary owner of Highways, would form such a friendship as was more common perhaps in a former generation than in these bustling, hurried days.

And then a word let drop by Miss Rose—such an innocent, ladylike, reticent word—had opened his eyes, and opened them to what was to Caryll a most disagreeable reality.

John Ryman? Yes, that must be the fortunate man—there could be little doubt about it! And a very good and suitable marriage it would appear for the Misses Charnwood's orphan niece. Ryman was not only heir to the Halkham estate, but even now a man of consequence and of considerable wealth.

Now, strange to say—and the good folk of Halkham would have been surprised indeed had they learnt the fact—Richard Caryll, in his early youth, had known John Ryman's mother, nay, more, that lady had gone out of her way to be kind to him. But he had not liked her. He had thought her a mincing, artificial woman.

Even now he could remember the disagreeable sensation of standing in the large Belgravian drawing-room in which Mrs. Ryman had received him, and mentally comparing its luxurious comfort with the humble, austerely furnished room in which he had left his mother—his gentle, pretty mother, who had been as delicately nurtured as Mrs. Ryman, but whom fate had treated so very differently.

At the time that comparison had been made Richard Caryll was earning his living as a clerk in the offices of the railway company which John Ryman's father had been instrumental in founding. It was a period full of painful,

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even hateful, memories, one of which he had never spoken since to any living being.

The thought of Mary Pechell bearing this other woman's name, nay, more, perhaps living in that very house where he had seen the former Mrs. Ryman—for there could be no doubt that John Ryman was indeed the son of the lady he had known twenty years ago—became suddenly intolerable. And yet at times he burned to see Miss Pechell and Ryman together.

But the long summer days went by, and John Ryman kept studiously away from Halkham, and from the girl whom he wished to make his wife. What holidays he took, he took elsewhere, keeping scrupulously to the compact he had made with himself rather than with Mary Pechell. He would give her time—plenty of time; and they would soon be seeing each other again in London, in the old familiar way. Meanwhile, nothing could be better than that she should spend a quiet holiday with her aunts, who he felt sure were on his side. Ryman feared no rival at Halkham—indeed, he feared no rival at all.

And then, one day, he heard by the merest chance that something was going to happen in the neighbourhood which made him feel that he must go to Halkham House, even if only for forty-eight hours.

John Ryman never forgot that according to all human probability he would be Lady Susan's heir. The thought of himself as future owner of Halkham was, as we know, very dear to him—indeed, all his hopes in this direction were bound up with those he had formed concerning Mary Pechell.

Now this which was to happen in the neighbourhood was

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of interest to him simply because, as future master of Halkham House, everything which concerned the neighbourhood must concern him.

A dance—a dance which was fast growing into the dimensions of a great ball, was about to be given at Stane Palace—Stane Palace, which, though fifteen miles from Halkham, and before the days of motor-cars, almost out of visiting distance, was yet socially, even politically, from Ryman's point of view, important as being the nearest dukery.

Time was when Highways had occupied the place Stane Palace had usurped. And in those distant days the Lord Wolferstan of his day had looked with jealous, if at the same time envious, eyes at the huge square building which was rising on a wooded down, close to a noble stretch of that Roman highway which had provided so convenient a Saxon title for a King's Sussex sweetheart. Once plain Ann Rowley, the lady had been content to become and remain Marchioness of Stane, but she had craved and obtained greater honours for her son, and it was her grandson, second Duke of Stane, who had built the palace.

And then there had begun a curious rivalry between the two families—that of the proud Carylls and that of the fortunate Rowleys. All through the eighteenth century the feud had endured, the Rowleys making good their position by wisely chosen alliances both at home and abroad, and by the judicious purchase of treasures so wonderful that at one time no foreigner of distinction visited England without hoping to include a stay at Stane in his itinerary.

By the time the last Lord Wolferstan committed the

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act of folly which was to have such dire consequences, Stane Palace had finally triumphed over Highways Castle.

George IV. often drove over from Brighton to see the great noble whom he could in truth call cousin; and that great noble's lady, while willing to entertain her dissolute Sovereign as often as he chose to honour Stane, could not bring herself to recognize, in even the smallest degree, the lady whom Lord Wolferstan had persuaded himself, and not a few of his neighbours, to be indeed his wife.

Nay, more, when later a word perhaps from the Duke of Stane might have made a great difference to the position of the young man who in everything but legal fact was the last representative of the Carylls, the Duke had not said that word. Instead, his Grace had actively sided with Lord Wolferstan's relations on the distaff side.

That part of the story was well known to Richard Caryll, for it had remained a bitter memory in his own father's mind, and as a youth he himself had read old letters angrily referring to the then Duke of Stane's unreasonable enmity.

Now Lady Susan Baliol knew all about the ancient feud, and she suddenly bethought herself one day that now was the time to heal the wound. Richard Caryll surely deserved the support of all his neighbours, gentle and simple. And so the old lady did what she had not done for years—she set out to pay a formal call, having given due notice of her intention, on the present owners of Stane Palace.

It was a long and tiring drive, and Lady Susan went alone. But she was quite successful, as was generally the case when she set her clever old mind on a thing.

The Duke of Stane was a kindly soul, and his Duchess

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even kinder. Lady Susan had but to say a word of explanation as to who her new neighbour at Highways really was, to receive immediate and sympathetic attention.

"Of course we'll have him here, dear Lady Susan! Why didn't you tell us before he was a friend of yours? We only heard Highways had been bought by an Australian."

And the Duke murmured, "I never thought my great-uncle behaved as he should have done over that matter! It's right that there should be a Caryll—any kind of Caryll—at Highways. Restoring the castle, Lady Susan? That'll cost your friend a pretty penny, and won't be much good when it's done. But still, it shows a proper spirit on the man's part."

And Lady Susan, much heartened by the reception of her news, proceeded to give a very good dry-point portrait of Richard Caryll; her account had the effect of making those who heard her really wish to meet her neighbour. Indeed, Lady Annabel, the Duke's unmarried sister, was quite moved.

"And he's actually got a man who's been in prison staying with him? What a good fellow he must be, Lady Susan!" She turned to the Duchess: "Don't you think we might have them both over to lunch?" and the other nodded good-naturedly.

And this was why Harold Donkins in the days that were to come—during those days of slow, painful effort to regain his standing on an honest man's platform which he had found so slippery—was able to look back and tell himself that whatever happened he must not disgrace the kind friend who had taken him to Stane Palace. How terrible it would be if the gentle lady who had there taken him

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under her soft wing—Lady Annabel was her curious name; he, Donkins, had never known any one called Annabel—should one day open a paper and see that he, Harold Donkins, had disgraced himself, and incidentally the owner of Highways!

Richard Caryll had been scarcely less surprised than his guest when he had found himself being entertained, with perhaps a rather over-careful courtesy, at Stane Palace. But he had been, in a shamefaced way, pleased—gratified to a point which he hoped no one could guess from his look or manner. And indeed no one could have divined from his indifferent, very quiet manner, that the new owner of Highways felt anything unusual in the invitation to Stane Palace, and he produced a very agreeable impression on the uncritical, anxious-to-be-kind party of five or six people assembled to greet him.

Nay, more, the Duke had a hankering for colonial investments, and Caryll was able to give him concerning some of these valuable and useful information. As for the Duchess, she thought her visitor an exceptionally pleasant man, and, having heard rumours of his wealth, she bethought herself that he would be an excellent addition to her eligible bachelors, for she was one of those exceptional people who like to entertain portionless maidens.

And then, after luncheon was over, a pretty married cousin of the host did Caryll the honours of the historic house.

"It doesn't do," she said with a funny little half wink, "to be ashamed of one's beginnings!" and she led him straightway to the case where quaint silver and ivory sev-

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enteenth-century playthings were inscribed as having been the cherished childish possessions of the very human King from whom the mighty house of Rowley had sprung. And the letter which had been sent with the toys to the beloved little son was there too, signed with the large C. R.

From the boudoir where these precious relics were kept, they went off to the picture gallery. Noble Vandycks, ignoble Knellers, a whole row of Lelys—all testified to the pride the Duke of Stane took in his Royal ancestry.

And on Richard Caryll the effect was curiously exhilarating. These great folk were all actually proud of what he had been brought up to believe was so indelible, so shameful a stain, and yet, from any ordinary point of view, what their Royal ancestor had done had been infinitely worse than Lord Wolferstan's action. The King had betrayed a faithful wife, and his own intimate friend, with a woman who, before he turned his baleful glance on her, had been happy and content, as well as virtuous, yet Stane Palace was not only a monument—it was a treasury commemorating and glorifying their crime!

During the long drive back to Highways he and his companion remained silent, each absorbed in his own thoughts.

Hard on that day had come another invitation to Stane Palace, and at first Caryll had been minded to refuse. "I don't know how to dance," he said rather savagely to Lady Susan.

"You'll find plenty more of your kind," she had answered dryly.

But when he found that Mary Pechell was going to be there he made up his mind to be there too.

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CHAPTER X

And so it came to pass that the first formal meeting between John Ryman and Richard Caryll took place at Stane Palace.

Each type of temperament has its pitfalls as well as its individual peculiarities. The temperament of John Ryman was that of the man who above all things values success and triumphant achievement. Such men are not snobs according to the common acceptation of the word. But they are apt to over-value rather than under-estimate the benefit of a certain kind of social recognition. That being so, it was natural that Ryman should be unconsciously impressed by seeing Caryll as the guest, and evidently a well-liked guest, of the Duke and Duchess of Stane.

It was, in a sense, the first formal introduction of the owner of Highways to the neighbourhood, and from the moment of his arrival both his host and hostess took pains to introduce him to those of the local magnates, their wives and daughters, with whom he was not yet acquainted.

Ryman knew him at once for the man he had first seen in the train about two months before. And while talking to his first partner, Lady Susan's nephew began measuring and marking the other with a very thoughtful eye.

Yes—Richard Caryll was certainly good-looking! Tall, fair men are so often heavy in build—but this man had

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an air of sinewy strength, of race and distinction. He looked in first-rate condition too, not an ounce of superfluous flesh about him. Ryman felt a slight resentful pang of envy. In spite of dumb-bells, fencing, and careful constitutionals, he sometimes feared his own sedentary life was beginning to tell.

Caryll evidently spent a great deal of his time out of doors, and Ryman idly wondered whether the new owner of Highways meant to hunt. The Rowleys were great hunting people, the Duke would be delighted to hail in this newcomer a keen addition to the Stane Street Hunt.

Suddenly the Duchess made her way up to Caryll and carried him off to introduce him to a politician who was just then staying at Stane, and for whom he, Ryman, had a considerable respect.

Yes, there could be no doubt about it, he must try and like the man. Caryll was obviously settled for life at Highways. He would in all probability marry, found a family—indeed, he would not be able to escape that fate. So argued Ryman a few minutes later, when he was watching, with rather cruel amusement, the Duchess's careful selection of a partner for Caryll from among those peculiar maidens who prefer "sitting out" to dancing.

No wonder the pretty girl with whom Ryman was dancing thought him one of those clever men who can also be so exceedingly boring and dull! But all the time he was in her agreeable company he had been watching Caryll and thinking of Caryll. Finally he told himself that it would be very impolitic, as well as extremely inconvenient, for the owners of Halkham and of Highways not to be on the best of terms.

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So it was that, carefully choosing his moment, John Ryman effected a self-introduction to Richard Caryll. By what they both, as it happened, considered a fortunate accident, the two chanced, still early in the evening, to find themselves, what men seldom have a chance of being at a ball, alone together.

Caryll had wandered off by himself. He felt an odd longing to be alone a moment, for he was bewildered by finding himself suddenly plunged in what was to him an entirely new phase of life.

Till to-night he had never been to a ball. He had never even seen dancing save on the boards of a theatre or music-hall.

Years and years before, when he was only twenty, and earning a poor and to him a very bitter living in London, a man had asked him to go to a dancing-saloon in the Edgware Road. He had refused, and as he walked through into the cool, spacious atmosphere of the Long Hall at Stane he remembered that long-forgotten episode, and how his friend—their office stools were side by side—had sneered at him for refusing the proposed entertainment.

He was glad now, very glad that he had not gone; that there rose no low, no grotesque memory to mar his vision of the beautiful scene he had just left—a scene which had brought to him the same enchantment and sense of unreality a sudden glimpse of fairyland might have done, save that here a touch of vivid human joy was added by the presence of Mary Pechell. They had only just spoken to one another, and then she had been borne away by a grizzled bachelor of whom no sane man could have felt

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jealous. He did not know as yet that John Ryman was here too at Stane Palace to-night.

Caryll felt a rush of warm gratitude to Lady Susan. It was to the kind old woman he owed all this. But for her it might have been years before he, a newcomer in this quiet, conservative part of England, would have gained even a slight acquaintance with the Duke and Duchess of Stane. And to Richard Caryll their recognition meant far more than any one, even than Lady Susan, could ever guess, if only because it ended the feud there had been between Highways Castle and Stane Palace.

Filled with a sense of security—nay, of triumph—Caryll strolled with leisurely step up to a picture, the painting of a famous racehorse—the winner of an historic Derby.

"Mr. Caryll?"—his name was suddenly uttered behind him in a cold, measured, unknown voice.

He turned sharply round, the colour rushing into his face.

"My name is Ryman—John Ryman. I am Lady Susan Baliol's nephew."

A dark young man stood holding out his hand, and, after a moment of scarcely perceptible hesitation, Caryll grasped it.

But even now he did not speak. Twice he opened his lips, but no words would come; and Ryman, though not quick at seeing such things, became aware of the other man's look of embarrassment and discomfiture. "He hasn't a good manner," the young man thought to himself, and he could not help a feeling of satisfaction. Unknowingly it made him a trifle more cordial.

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"You've made quite a conquest of my aunt, Mr. Caryll!"

And Caryll at last pulled himself together. "She has been very kind to me," he muttered, "very kind indeed."

"I hear you tried to persuade her to come here to-night. But I could have told you there was no hope of that!"

"I think it would have amused her. Lady Susan is so vividly interested in everything that is going on in the neighbourhood. I'm sorry she wouldn't come. I wanted her to come with me"—Caryll had now recovered his usual quiet, measured manner, and Ryman felt a touch of irritation.

"She would of course have come with me," he said, the coldness back in his voice.

"Ah! But I didn't know you were going to be here."

Caryll smiled the easy, good-humoured smile of an older man addressing a junior. He was fiercely cursing himself for having betrayed the feelings of fear, shame, even terror which had shaken him on hearing this commonplace young man announce who he was. Caryll had, as we know, at least one secret reason for disliking the name of Ryman.

"I hear that you are making great changes at Highways?" Lady Susan's nephew was struggling to say something cordial, and he found it oddly difficult. The only moment he had liked the fellow was when Caryll had stood tongue-tied—an awkward, unmannerly colonial, not knowing how to take the pleasant greeting of a stranger.

But now that Caryll in some mysterious way had recaptured his ordinary, well-bred manner, now that Caryll was claiming a greater measure of intimacy with Lady

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Susan than was proper, Lady Susan's heir suddenly felt all his old, unreasoning prejudice against the man who had bested him in a bargain, and in a bargain he had had so much at heart, surge back.

"Townley is doing the work of restoration for me," said Caryll, "and so I think it will be well done."

"Townley?" echoed Ryman. His way of life did not bring him in contact with art in any form. He had never heard the name of the great architect.

"The man who restored Bramber," said Caryll quietly. "He's supposed to be the best man for that sort of job. But I'm sorry to say he thinks that not much can be done before next spring."

And then, rather to the relief of both men, there came an interruption. One of the younger daughters of the house came up to them.

"Mr. Caryll!" she exclaimed. "Mamma has been looking for you everywhere; and we want you, Mr. Ryman, in our set."

They both followed her back into the ball-room.

At last Caryll escaped from the cheerful chaperon he had been bidden to take in to an early supper. He slipped, alone, into one of the window recesses of the ball-room. All his pleasure, his sense of triumph was gone. He told himself that his first instinct had been right. He should not have come to Stane Palace to-night. He was seized with a violent, unreasoning prejudice against the man who, if rumour spoke true, was not only to be in course of time his nearest neighbour, but also husband to Mary Pechell. And yet—and yet he would have had to meet John Ryman sometime, and he knew enough of human nature to be

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aware that perhaps on the whole it was a good thing that he had met him, for the first time, here.

And that was true. Ryman had not been pleasantly impressed by Caryll, but he intended to make the best of him. It was clear the Duke and Duchess meant to "take him up," and to a man like Ryman such a fact counted, as we know, perhaps rather unduly. And then Mary Pechell was evidently on cordial terms with the queer fellow—the fellow who had two such very different manners at command. And this, too, counted with John Ryman. He thought a very great deal of Mary Pechell's opinion.

Caryll, it seemed, had been very kind to some poor protégé of Mary's, a man who had been in prison. Lady Susan had given her nephew a satirical account of the whole matter. She had resented her neighbour's act of altruism, for during the days Harold Donkins had been at Highways she had seen extremely little of Caryll, and that had irked her. But he, John Ryman, had been moved by the story. That was the sort of good deed he could understand—understand, but not emulate. That was the sort of thing he would have liked to do himself—if he had not been so busy a man.

As the night wore on, and it was a long night to Richard Caryll, he somewhat recovered himself; yet even so he could not prevent Ryman's quiet, assured presence from grating on his nerves. Also he found it very difficult to understand the relations between Mary Pechell and Lady Susan's nephew. They danced together three or four times; they were obviously on terms not only of amity, but of a certain intimacy. Still, Ryman was the

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last man to wear his heart upon his sleeve, especially here, where he was so well known. And Caryll began to question, to doubt the truth of what he had heard. But, in addition to Mrs. Segrave's gossip, there was what Miss Rose had said. Miss Rose was incapable of invention.

No, decidedly Caryll's second expedition to Stane Palace was not as agreeable as the first had been, though that was through no fault of his hosts. And then towards the end of the ball something happened which surprised Caryll very much.

When he had lunched at Stane Palace, no allusion of any sort had been made to his ancestry. But to-night the Duke said a word which made it clear that he knew who his guest was. Then Lady Susan had betrayed the secret? And if she had chosen to do so to the Duke of Stane, she had certainly done so to her nephew.

Well, what of it? Caryll argued the thing out with himself. After all, what did it matter? He no longer felt ashamed of his connexion with the former owners of Highways. In fact, he realized that, in the world in which he now found himself, it was better to be a Caryll on the left, than an honest plebeian on the right, side of the blanket!

True, there had been another serious reason why he did not wish the fact of his descent from the last Earl of Wolferstan to go widely forth. But now he told himself determinedly that he had been foolishly afraid.

Not that he was given much time for quiet thought. Everything was done by his hostess and her daughters to make him feel at ease, to provide him with pleasant partners. It seemed to him that Mary Pechell to a certain extent avoided him; but somehow he did not mind

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that. And there came a time when she came and whispered, "Mr. Caryll, will you take Aunt Alice and give her some supper?" and a quick look of understanding flashed between them; and that look somehow compensated him for what had seemed to be the neglect of his friend.

But at last, when every one was leaving, Richard Caryll and John Ryman came into something which for a moment looked like conflict. Each greatly desired to escort Miss Charnwood and Mary Pechell, who in their turn had brought one of the Misses Segrave in their hired fly, back to Halkham.

Ryman was the first to be refused, and that very decidedly, by Miss Alice.

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed. "Why shouldn't we go back in our fly? I shouldn't think of using your aunt's carriage, John."

And when Caryll, a moment later, and all unknowing that a similar offer had already been refused, urgently pressed her to come with him, declaring that his horses would do the distance in far less time, she again refused, with softer, kindlier accents.

"It's really very kind of you, Mr. Caryll. But no," she said, "we're quite all right. I daresay you'll find some one else who'll be very glad of a lift home." And to the two young ladies under her charges he further explained, "It would have been quite absurd! Why, we should have been four, and Mr. Caryll would have had to sit with his back to the horses the whole way."

John Ryman did not fulfil what had been his own invitation to Highways. The morning after the ball there came a telegram which necessitated his return to London

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on urgent business; and so Lady Susan received her account of all that had happened only from Caryll and Mary Pechell.

Each separately gave her a pleasant description of the Stane Palace ball, and Caryll was able to assure her, in all sincerity, that he had enjoyed it, and that he was glad he had gone. Indeed, looking back, the one or two unpleasant incidents that had disturbed him faded to their true significance.

But during the days that followed, days which saw him very often at the Little House, he found himself constantly debating with himself as to the relations between John Ryman and Mary Pechell.

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CHAPTER XI

No human being, however shrewd, however observant however sympathetic, knows much of what is pass in the heart of another.

During the whole of her long life Lady Susan I had been interested in people. She had never been a g reader; she had not cared in any very serious sense t any sport or hobby. But men and women, or so she fan cied, almost always had something to tell, and evep teach her.

Unfortunately for herself, she was lacking in the tact, the delicate art of the listener which alone induce kind of confidences she sought. Also she lived in t country, a place where, as the French student of manner remarked, one must tolerate one's neighbours and cannot choose one's friends.

Now in a human sense the only new interests life had brought her of late years had been the affection of Mary Pechell, and more latterly the acquaintance of Richard Caryll. But the mistress of Halkham House never thought of her two favourites in connexion the one with the other, and though she had not failed to notice that Mary had altered in the last few weeks, she naturally ascribed the change to the only fact to which she had a clue.

Life had taught Lady Susan that there is a type of unawakened woman, who, when touched by the burning finger of passion, melts as if she had been ice and not the

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marble that she seems. She had never supposed Mary Pechell to belong to this company—such a supposition would have been repugnant to her—and yet of late she had sometimes wondered whether, after all, her young friend was not, in this matter, similar to so many other women.

If this were so, if the girl had really been moved more n she knew by John Ryman's passion, then surely he, ıis side, should be quick to take advantage of the ange in her? For in that case, as Lady Susan well new, it would not be John Ryman Mary loved; it would be something Mary fancied John Ryman to be.

But back in her shrewd old brain Lady Susan felt that new influence, some man other than John Ryman, probably come into Mary Pechell's life. If that was truth—and to Lady Susan it would have been a painıl truth—the fortunate man who had known how to bring that new, softer look into Mary's candid eyes must of course be some one in London—some man whose acquaintance she had made in the season which had lately ended.

Lady Susan made up her mind to speak to her young friend. If John Ryman alone were in question—how she longed to believe that he had been the magician who had changed Mary and brought that glowing look to her face —then what she had to say might make a difference as to the matter being settled soon. If Mary had another lover, then Lady Susan wished to know the worst—or best.

She chose the early September afternoon of the day before that on which Mary Pechell was going back to London.

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The girl had lunched at Halkham House, and the two were now sitting out of doors on a terraced lawn which commanded a noble view of downs and sea.

"It's a pity you can't stay a week longer—you might have come on here for a few days."

"I should have liked that," said Mary affectionately.

Of late Lady Susan's kindness, her fondness of manner, had made Mary feel vaguely guilty. She did not suppose John Ryman had confided in his aunt, for she was still young enough to believe that men keep such hopes and fears as those which possessed Ryman to themselves; but she had come to the conclusion that Lady Susan, who was, as she knew, almost uncannily clever concerning such things, had guessed the truth, and she was nervously afraid of being questioned on the matter. The thought of John Ryman was very distasteful just now to Mary Pechell.

She went on, rather nervously, "I am really due in town, for the lady who has been in charge of our office all August must go away for her holiday."

"You said that exactly as John Ryman would have said it!" There was a satirical inflection in Lady Susan's voice.

"Did I? Well, I've always said that there was a good deal more in common between Mr. Ryman and myself than you believe."

Mary spoke with a smile, even a touch of heightened colour, but also with a matter-of-fact composure which rather angered and a little perplexed Lady Susan.

"Mary? I have something I wish to tell you." And there was that in the way her thin old voice pronounced the words which made a tremour go through the girl.

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"Yes—Lady Susan?"

"My dear, I think you ought to know before you leave Halkham that John spoke to me, and told me of—of his hopes. Perhaps I ought to add that he only did so after you had dashed them to the ground."

"I do not think he should have done that," said Mary Pechell slowly, and she felt very much surprised that he had done so.

"Do you mind speaking to me of the matter?" Lady Susan's voice grew very gentle. She put out her hand and laid it on the younger woman's fair hair. Then, as if ashamed of this slight manifestation of affection, she drew it away—quickly.

But Mary felt touched.

"No, Lady Susan, I don't mind—only it seems so odd for a man to tell such a thing."

"I understand you told him that you meant to remain unmarried?" Lady Susan put the words in the form of a question, but again there crept a sarcastic inflection in her voice.

"Yes, I did tell him that," said Mary, and suddenly her extreme folly in having said such a thing became painfully apparent to her. "Perhaps I was unwise to do so. I suppose it is always unwise to give any reason when one feels—one feels——"

"He told me that you and he are still to be good friends?"

"I think—I hope we shall be," said Mary; and once more she realized how extraordinarily foolish she had been.

"I suppose the truth is"—Lady Susan looked round at her with a sort of surprised attention—"that, unlike most

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girls, you've never, till the last few weeks, given much thought to love or—or even to marriage, Mary?"

Again a curious tremor went through the girl. There came to her the perception that Lady Susan meant to force her confidence, and for the first time she understood her aunts' strong prejudice against the lady of the manor. Lady Susan had no right to cross-examine her like this!

"I have never had occasion to think of marriage with reference to myself—or any wish to do so." She spoke with firm, defiant decision.

"Well, I wish you would think of marriage now," said Lady Susan deliberately. "You know that I have never particularly liked John Ryman. But I feel it on my conscience to tell you, my dear, that I consider—indeed that I feel sure—John would make a most excellent husband. He is a man of principle, a man of high character; and Mary, believe me, there's many a worse foundation for marriage than friendship."

Mary felt relieved. Then Lady Susan knew—guessed nothing; and, after all, there was as yet nothing to know, nothing to guess.

"You're very kind," she said, "very, very kind, Lady Susan. I'm grateful to you for your"—she hesitated, and then concluded with the words, "for your interest and affection."

"I have never been attached to any young woman as I am to you," said Lady Susan suddenly. "I should like to know you're to be here after I'm gone. When John spoke to me, the notion almost reconciled me to the knowledge that he must be my heir."

Again she put out her hand and touched Mary's fair

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hair for a moment. "Strange, isn't it, that he and I should agree about such a matter as this? That he should single out the one woman in the world I should have chosen for him?"

And this time there was still a sharp satiric edge to her old voice. Mary again felt really moved.

Lady Susan waited a moment, and then went on, still speaking quite lightly:

"We had an odd kinsman when I was a girl—a curious old Roman priest who belonged to the elder branch of my family; his blood had not been tainted by that of my grandmother, the shepherd's daughter! He had been educated abroad, and often made queer remarks. I have always remembered one thing he said—though at the time I really had no notion of what he meant. It was that, 'Men and women are so apt to forget that marriage is a state of grace, and not a state of nature!' Now, my dear, life has taught me that he was quite right; that fact—and it is a fact—is almost always forgotten. As for me," said Lady Susan with a twinkle in her light blue eyes, "nature and grace always pulled quite different ways!"

"Did they?" said Mary wonderingly.

"They do with most people," said Lady Susan dryly. "Nature in my case, Mary—I fear I am about to shock you—took the shape of a married man; grace was represented by Mr. Baliol."

Mary made no comment, but there came into her honest eyes a look of dawning, rather troubled comprehension.

"Yes," said Lady Susan, "yes—and nature, as is too often the case, all but conquered, Mary! But the married man, doubtless fortunately for me, though I did not think

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so at the time, tardily prevented my making a fool of myself as well as of him."

"Was Mr. Baliol at all like John Ryman?" asked Mary slowly.

"Not in the least! Not in the least!" cried Lady Susan quickly. Her John—generous, large-hearted, passionately fond—like John Ryman? No, indeed! But she suddenly remembered the object she had in view. "My husband," she said slowly, "ran through all his money before I met him. But he was a very good fellow, Mary, true as steel—far too good for me, though I think I made it up to him afterwards. At any rate I did my best."

She waited for what seemed to both of them a long moment, then: "And now, Mary, that I've told you my secret, I wonder whether you will tell me yours?"

Mary Pechell blushed violently. She was taken utterly by surprise. "I have no secret!" she exclaimed, a little defiantly.

"I don't mean a secret about a married man," said Lady Susan rather coldly. "I should not suspect you of anything so heinous as that, Mary; but I have wondered —I have not been able to help wondering whether you told the truth to John Ryman—whether it was indeed true that there was no one else?"

"I told him the absolute truth," said Mary.

There was a painful, a strained silence between the two women, and Mary Pechell got up from the low chair where she had been sitting.

"Mary," said Lady Susan rather pitifully, "I fear you are going away angry and offended with your old friend?"

Mary shook her head. Angry?—offended?—no, these

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were not the words which described what she felt. She was bruised, hurt, a little bewildered by this probing into her inmost heart.

"I know you mean kindly and well by me," she said. "But oh! Lady Susan, I shall never—never be able to marry John Ryman! I was foolish in letting him believe—as I fear I did let him believe—that everything could go on just as it was before. Do you think I had better write to him?" She looked down with a pleading, troubled look into the older woman's face.

Lady Susan's stout heart sank. There was such a note of decision, of finality, in Mary's voice. "There *is* some one else," she said to herself.

Mary Pechell was again speaking: "I know I was stupid —very, very stupid not to know! But though I used to see him a good deal in town, I never thought he really liked me. I thought he came out of good nature, and because he was interested in my work——"

"My dear, you must be very simple!"

"I suppose I am."

"And what a good opinion you must have of men!"

"I suppose I have."

"And yet," said Lady Susan musingly, "your work— or so I've always understood—brings you in contact with a good deal of raw human nature, Mary?"

"Yes," said Mary, "it does indeed. But John Ryman isn't raw"—and for the first time she smiled during this painful, this difficult conversation.

"Don't write to him yet," said Lady Susan earnestly. "There isn't such a hurry as that—especially if, as you tell me, Mary, there is no one else."

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CHAPTER XII

Then Mary, rather suddenly, went back to London, and life, at any rate at Highways, became curiously savourless.

Very soon Caryll found that he too must go to town, and a parcel from Miss Rose formed an excellent excuse for his first call at the tiny house behind Westminster Abbey where Miss Pechell lived with a cousin who just now was still away.

And within a short time they came to meet almost every day, though neither could have explained how it came to pass that they did so.

Caryll would come in the morning to the odd little office in Old Queen Street where the Home Workers' interests were being so jealously watched and guarded—though there was never much doing when Parliament was up; and somehow there was always a good reason for his coming. One day he brought her—this was to the office of course—a cheque for a hundred pounds.

"I want to give this to your work," he said abruptly, and the Honorary Secretary of the Society of Home Workers had not felt that she could demur to the gift. People sent money to that tiny, shabby little office from all parts of the world. Not unfrequently an anonymous gift would come, and with it the words, "From one who was long a Home Worker and who would have hated being interfered with."

More formal but quite as frequent were Caryll's calls at

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the almost cottage-like little house tucked away behind the Abbey.

Small wonder that very soon Richard Caryll and Mary Pechell reached that deep, wordless stage of intimacy in which a man and a woman each feels that he and she, while still having much to learn concerning the other, is on the verge of complete understanding.

In those early days of their friendship Caryll did not often talk about himself—not as much as Mary would have liked him to do.

She pictured his past life as full of movement and agreeable adventure, and sometimes what he would say—generally in connexion with some eager interest or plan of her own, for Mary Pechell was in the young, buoyant, constructive phase of life—gave colour to that view. As their acquaintance grew closer she said less and listened more, but it had become an exquisite pleasure to him to hear her talk—she was so young, so fresh, full of such unquestioning belief in the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Not for worlds would he have shaken, still less destroyed, that to him pathetic delusion.

Yet Mary Pechell was no fool. Had she been one of the kindly generous souls who are content to go through life in horror-proof blinkers, Caryll might have come to love her, but he could never have brought himself to respect her. The injustices, the shames, the cruelties of life had bitten too deeply into his strong secretive nature. It was the nobility of her outlook, the generous helpfulness of her, which had first attracted Richard Caryll.

In such an intimacy as that which had arisen with such surprising quickness between Caryll and Miss Pechell

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there come episodes, apparently trifling incidents, which are destined to remain deeply graven on the tablets of memory. She at least will never forget the evening which marked a new and closer stage in her friendship with the man of whom she still knew little else than that his companionship had become very pleasant to her.

After a day which had seemed long and fuller than usual of the tiresome minutiæ of office routine, she had come home to find a note:—

DEAR MISS PECHELL,

I propose to come in for a few moments to see you this evening at nine o'clock. I have a favour to ask of you.

Yours truly,

RICHARD CARYLL.

Most people—and especially is this true of young people—lead a dual existence. The one is secret, intensely personal, unavowed—the other is that which circumstances, training, and, in some cases, conscience compel. But of the two it is the first, that hidden life which is in so great a measure of the spirit rather than of the body, that really counts in the mental development of the human being.

The men and women surrounding Mary Pechell all led, or had led, with varying intensity, this dual existence; this was true of Lady Susan Baliol, of John Ryman, of both Alice and Rose Charnwood, and, in a far greater degree than the other four, of Richard Caryll. With him the outer, day-to-day, life was the husk, the interior life the kernel, of his being.

Mary Pechell had never possessed this inner, secret

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life. She had never had a thought or an impulse which she would have been proud or sorry to reveal. Only those born singularly healthy and even more singularly selfless are equally blessed.

But lately, during the last few weeks, Mary had become aware of a second self springing into life, and this intruder clamoured to be heard, to be considered, even to be indulged. In one sense Lady Susan had been right. For it was John Ryman, not Richard Caryll, who had awakened the hitherto dormant, now unwelcome, uneasy creature who began to make everyday life and its once satisfying, absorbing duties and pleasures seem of no account. And then, after John Ryman had compelled her to enter the atmosphere of his violent, if frustrated, passion—an atmosphere singularly propitious to the birth of a second self—had come Richard Caryll.

As she stood in the narrow panelled passage of her London home, with Caryll's letter open in her hand, all sorts of thoughts, half-formed hopes and fears, jostled themselves in her brain, and not one of them could she have shared with another mind and heart. And still holding his letter open in her hand, she walked at last into her sitting-room.

This was the first time Caryll had proposed to come to see her in the evening.

Now Mary Pechell had often gone out with John Ryman; they had been together not infrequently to the opera, to the theatre, and far more often to public meetings. In that she had been unconventional, choosing to consider herself no longer subject to the regulations made for

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those girls of her age and station who lead idle, sheltered lives.

But now, to-day, the knowledge that Caryll was going to pay her an evening call filled her with a suspense and an excitement which she resented, and determined to banish.

She took up a book. It was one which Caryll had given her—he had a fine, eclectic taste in literature—and by chance she opened it at a page where her eyes fell upon the words, "Falling in love is the one illogical adventure, the one thing of which we are tempted to think as supernatural, in our trite and reasonable world."

And then Mary Pechell stopped short and began to think.

Falling in love? Till quite lately the familiar phrase had meant nothing to her. Deep in her heart she had cherished a sort of kindly contempt for those about her who fell in love. True, the great romances of the past had attracted her as they might have done, and often do, a clever and eager-natured child; and exactly in the same measure as a warm-hearted child might have done had she always felt a tender and a resentful interest in her aunt Rose's pitiful and now ghostly love story. But of the master-passion of humanity in any real sense she knew nothing.

She had met love in neither of his more familiar guises —neither as the tricksy sprite whose graceful figure throws no shadow as he darts hither and thither on our dull earth, nor as the welcome conqueror who so soon develops into the exacting tyrant.

When love had come to Mary Pechell in the guise of John Ryman she had shrunk back affrighted, filled with an indignant, instinctive revulsion, and yet the potent

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presence had quickened, nay created in her, new and unsought demands and emotions.

To-night as she sat alone she dimly apprehended something of this, and it made her what she had never before been—ashamed.

Richard Caryll had not "made love" to her as, looking back, she now knew that John Ryman had tried to do, though at the time she had not understood his clumsy, rather pompous compliments and words of measured approval.

Was it possible, so she asked herself for the first time to-night, that there are wordless ways of making love? And yet another and a more pressing question thrust itself on her mind—Was it conceivable that a young woman, a sensible, self-respecting human being, should herself be attracted by a man who did not reciprocate the feeling? When Caryll had told her the day before that he was going back to Highways almost immediately, as his architect wished him to be there when the work of restoration and rebuilding began, she had been filled with a terrible sense of void, of coming loneliness.

Big Ben struck nine, in slow, stately cadence; and as the last stroke died in the still air she heard what had become a now familiar knock and ring; a moment later Richard Caryll was standing in the little panelled room with which he had grown so oddly familiar the last three weeks.

And when she saw him there, sitting in the big easy chair she had already begun to think of as his chair, her secret, anxious—she was now inclined to think her morbid—self

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disappeared, leaving only the happy, simple-hearted Mary Pechell of old days. It was strange how happily at ease she always felt with this man of whom she still knew so little. Never had she had that sense of security with John Ryman. But somehow she and Richard Caryll always had a hundred things to say to one another; they were ever discovering new points of contact—not always new points of agreement.

Ryman quite unconsciously made her ever feel that she was, if delightful and charming as a companion, then also inferior to himself in intellect, perception, and judgment. Now Caryll had never once made her experience that very unpleasant sensation, and yet Caryll was a great deal older, as well as probably a far wiser and broader-natured man than Ryman. But to-night he looked younger than she had ever seen him look before, perhaps because to-night, even in the shaded light of the small room, his face was strained and thin.

"Miss Pechell," he said at last, "I'll tell you now the favour I've come to ask you——"

He stopped short and Mary looked at him very gravely. She could see he was extraordinarily moved.

"Yes," she said gently.

"I want you to go and see two ladies in whom I am greatly interested." He added hastily, "They are old ladies. Their name is Wigney—Mrs. Wigney and Miss Richenda Wigney. They are sisters-in-law, devoted to one another, and linked by the greatest of all ties—that of having suffered—suffered much—together. They are distant relations of mine."

Mary's secret, new, inner self felt a sense of sudden in-

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tolerable disappointment and humiliation. Was that all he wanted of her? Never had man presumed so little on what had become a close friendship! But she composed her face into a friendly, intelligent smile—what was this he was saying?——

"I've not seen them for very many years, and there are reasons, with which I need not trouble you, why I do not wish to see them now. If you find it possible to do so, I wish you to refrain from mentioning me. All I wish you to say is that you've been asked to see them by a friend of a Mr. Frantwood."

"I quite understand. Mr. Frantwood is the name. I'll make a note of it. You know I'm always seeing people I do not know in connexion with my work."

But Richard Caryll went on as if he had not heard her.

"They live in Islington. It's a part of London with which you are probably unacquainted——"

He waited a moment, and looked at her inquiringly.

Mary hesitated—"Islington? Yes, it's quite true that I have never been to Islington. I suppose it's a pretty old suburb——"

And then for the first time his face threw off the look of suppressed anxiety and suffering which she had been too much absorbed in her own feelings to notice. He smiled, but it was rather a queer smile.

"Pretty? No, I do not think the greatest lover of Islington could call Islington pretty!"

"It must have been pretty in the days of the Bailiff's Daughter," she said lightly.

But he looked at her very gravely.

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"They are living"—he explained—"I mean Mrs. Wigney and her sister-in-law, in a little house where they first went thirty years ago. Materially speaking, Mrs. Wigney is much better off than when she first went to Islington. But still, I should like you to find out if anything can be done to make these two ladies any happier, their lives more worth living. Mrs. Wigney has been a woman of many sorrows, Miss Pechell. Her only son died under peculiarly tragic circumstances——" he stopped abruptly; and then continued in a lighter tone:

"Now it occurred to me lately that it would probably do them good if they were to spend say, August, or even part of the winter, at a place like Brighton or Bournemouth. They've not been away for years."

"Yes," said Mary, "I should think that would be an excellent plan."

How good it was of him to take this practical interest in these old ladies! It made her feel, not for the first time, how little wealth had spoilt him.

"Have you ever thought of having them down to Highways?"

"At Highways?" a deep flush came over Richard Caryll's face. "Oh no! I thought I had made it clear that I do not wish them to know that I am asking you to go and see them. I only want them to suppose that Mrs. Wigney's cousin, an Australian who, as I said just now, is named Frantwood, desires to know that they are well, and generally speaking in good case. Of course, I wish you to go at your convenience—only I should like to know what day would suit you best."

"I think——" she hesitated—"I think I could go the

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day after to-morrow, Mr. Caryll. Of course you must give me the address."

"I shall drive you there," he said shortly. "If you will tell me the time you will be free, I will call for you in a hansom."

A hansom was then London's fleetest vehicle.

"You needn't trouble to do that," she answered a little shyly. And there was to Caryll something adorable, intoxicating, in this rather new shyness of hers. "I can find my way quite well alone."

"Of course I'll go with you! I have been looking forward to going with you."

He got up, held her hand in parting a thought longer than he had ever held it before, and then left her.

Mary Pechell opened the volume of essays she had been reading when Caryll came in, and then flinging it from her with a violence which would have half frightened, half fascinated her normal self—for it was the other, the intruding self which was acting so strangely—burst into tears.

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CHAPTER XIII

One never hears of a sedan chair having been made to hold two people. Our ancestors, with their strange proprieties and stranger laxities, would have doubtless been shocked at the notion. And very soon the generation of those who loved and hated, quarrelled and made it up within the narrow intimate confines of a hansom cab will have faded away, leaving no record of the part the quaintest vehicle ever devised by man played in Victorian society.

A hansom cab was the desert island on which two Londoners could ever take refuge, secure of a singularly close and intimate solitude—a solitude often made doubly sure and secret owing to the happy vagaries of the London climate.

The afternoon on which Richard Caryll called for Mary Pechell was sunny and golden, but as the wind blew in and round them Caryll felt that never had he and Mary been alone as they were now alone, secure from interruption, secure from prying and questioning, if kindly, eyes. And he soon became deliciously aware, as he had never before had the opportunity of being aware, of the delicate, spirited beauty of her profile, of the firm lines, at once austere and generous, of her mouth, and short upper lip.

"She's beautiful!" he said to himself with a pang of apprehension, and he wondered jealously if she had ever driven with another man as she was now driving with him.

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The thought that she had ever done so with—say John Ryman—was so poignantly disturbing that he felt he must know. And he took the crudest, simplest way of finding out.

"I'm afraid you will find this a very long drive—unless you are in the habit of taking long drives in hansom cabs. I'm told people make up parties and drive down to Richmond in the season——"

"I've very little to do with those sort of people!" Mary turned and smiled frankly at him.

She was enjoying this odd expedition to Islington. A long, dreamless night had brought back all her self-possession. She had made up her mind that she and Caryll would be friends—the best of friends till death parted them. Had not Lady Susan told her the new owner of Highways did not mean to marry—and had not she, Mary, told John Ryman the same fact about herself?

"I suppose it's the kind of world Mr. Ryman lives in?" Caryll spoke with constraint.

Mary looked straight out before her. "Yes, I suppose it is," she agreed. "He knows a great many rich, idle people—not that he's idle himself," she added quickly.

"He's a great friend of yours, is he not?" Caryll asked the question very lightly; but Mary turning surprised, saw the jealous suspense in his eyes, and a slow, burning blush rose to her face. What had Caryll been told? and who had told him?

"He is an old friend," she said steadily, "and a very kind friend to my work, Mr. Caryll," and then the colour receded from her face. That was the exact truth.

But on Caryll her blush had produced a terrible revul-

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sion of feeling. Then there was something between John Ryman and Mary Pechell—and that something could only be an understanding that would in due course lead to marriage. Fool, fool that he had been not to take Lady Susan's warning! The more so that he, Richard Caryll, was bound by his own secret code of honour to associate no good and innocent woman's life with his. Well, he was being well punished for his temporary lapse.

Had it been possible, he would have bidden the driver turn there and then. But that was not possible. He must go on now, and carry the present dangerous—for it was dangerous—business through.

Luckily they were nearing their journey's end, and Miss Pechell, now painfully aware of his silent abstraction, was looking out of the little side window. They had left the noisy broad thoroughfare, lined with mean shops and tawdry-looking houses, and were spinning through quiet streets and formal squares which might have belonged to some provincial town a hundred miles from London.

"This is more what I supposed Islington to be," she said at last, looking into his sullen face a little pleadingly.

And, ashamed, he roused himself. "Yes, when the citizens of London gave up living over their shops and business places, many of them moved out here. The curious little house where you are going was one of those built for their accommodation. If I remember rightly, there's still a small garden filled with two or three big trees, a survival of those days."

"Then you've been there?" She had thought he had never been to the place where lived the old ladies to whom he wished to be kind.

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"I was there as a boy," he answered, "and I've never forgotten the impression the place made upon me—the place and its inmates."

They had come within sight of a short terrace of eighteenth-century houses, and Caryll's hand shot up with a nervous gesture to the postern in the roof.

The cab stopped short, and he helped Mary Pechell down. Then there came over her the discomfiting sensation that her companion was not thinking of her at all. She felt, as they walked side by side to the end of the little terrace, that his mind was absorbed in some secret thought.

"I'll leave you here," he said at last. "And—and, Miss Pechell?" There was a deprecating, a pleading note in his voice.

She turned to him eagerly—but all he said was, and again she realized that he was scarcely thinking of her at all—"The longer you can find it in your kindness to prolong your call on Mrs. Wigney, the more grateful I shall be. A visitor in these two ladies' dull lives is quite an event."

"Of course I'll stay a long time! I quite understand."

And the quiet, confident words jarred horribly on Richard Caryll. How little she understood! How shocked, how amazed she would have been could she have looked into his mind, ransacked the dark places of his memory! And she meanwhile was telling herself how good and kind he was to take all this trouble for two old ladies he had not seen for years, and in whom he could not feel any vivid or close interest.

As she was walking away from him, he suddenly called her back. "Miss Pechell?" he said urgently. "One word more!"

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She turned. "Yes, Mr. Caryll?"

"There's probably a third inmate of the little household. She may be dead, but I do not think she is. Her name is Tabb—Martha Tabb. She has been a wonderfully good and faithful servant to Mrs. Wigney. For two years she went without wages. I should be grateful if you would find out if she too is comfortable, if there is anything that could be done for her to make her lot more pleasant. She was nurse to the son—the son of whose death I told you the night before last."

When she was close up to the front door of the small Georgian brick house, Mary turned and looked at the place where she had left Richard Caryll. She could just see his tall figure pacing very slowly up and down at right angles to the quiet terrace.

She rang the old-fashioned bell, and in the stillness there came a shrill clang echoing through the house. And then, for the first time, she was suddenly filled with an uneasy and rather painful curiosity. Why had Mr. Caryll asked her to go and see these people? Why, after all, had he not gone to see them himself? Why should he not have them down to Highways? Mr. Caryll was not a man—of that she felt quite sure—to be ashamed of, or even bored with poor or unfortunate relations.

She waited for what seemed a long time, and then just as she was going to ring the bell once more she heard the thud of heavy steps behind the door, and it was opened by a tall, stout, elderly woman dressed in an old-fashioned servant's cap and black apron.

This surely must be Mrs. Tabb.

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"I have come to see Mrs. Wigney," said Mary. "I think she is expecting me."

"Are you the lady from Mr. Frantwood," asked the woman, with a strange, restrained eagerness in her voice, and as she asked the question she gazed searchingly at the visitor.

"Yes," said Mary Pechell, and she blushed uncomfortably. What an odd part Richard Caryll had set her to play! She was too much under his spell to resent what he had done, and yet it vaguely pained and perplexed her. There was nothing ambiguous in her nature, nothing which responded to a taste for mystery. And she felt her discomfort increase when the servant said abruptly:

"Walk in, Miss. They've been expecting you all day. They thought maybe that you might come in the morning."

She turned and led the way down a short, rather dark hall, and opened a door.

"The lady from Mr. Frantwood, ma'am," she said. And Mary found herself in one of those eighteenth-century rooms of which the modern architect seems to have lost the secret, and which, if small, are so exquisitely proportioned that they give a satisfying feeling of space, light, and dignity.

The principal architectural feature of Mrs. Wigney's sitting-room was a circular bay containing three long windows opening out on to an iron balcony, beyond which spread the now yellowing leaves of the high plane trees Richard Caryll remembered.

An emerald green wallpaper formed an appropriate background for the few good pieces of old furniture with

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which the room was sparsely furnished. Arranged with care to form a dado, hung some faded water-colours, and a number of old line engravings. Below these, to the right of the door, was a hanging bookshelf containing, as Miss Pechell could not help seeing, well bound, but old and shabby, copies of the large first editions of Dickens and Thackeray, and some of the Victorian poets.

In complete harmony with her surroundings was the small, frail figure of an old lady who had been sitting, when the door opened, by the centre window, but who now got up and stood, with mittened hand extended, towards her visitor.

"Will you please go and tell Miss Richenda that our visitor has arrived, Tabb," she said gently, and then drew Mary towards her.

"It is very kind of you," she went on in a low, feeble voice, "to come to so remote a place as Islington to see two old women. And I am much obliged to my cousin for sending me news of himself by you. Miss Wigney, who will be here in a moment, will also be pleased to hear of my kind cousin. I gather he is very prosperous, Miss Pechell," and Mary was surprised to find that her name was correctly pronounced, and that though the maid had not announced her by it.

"I suppose you also know Mr. Cutt?" went on the old lady pleasantly.

"No," said Mary in a faltering tone. She felt sadly uncomfortable; she had never heard of Mr. Cutt, and she did not feel, when it came to the point, that she could bring herself to pretend much knowledge of Mr. Frantwood.

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"Mr. Cutt is our lawyer, my dear, and a friend of my cousin Frantwood. He is very kind and attentive, and he comes and sees us four times a year. It is from him we have occasional news of James Frantwood. But this is the first time our cousin has actually sent a friend of his to see us."

"I'm afraid you'll be disappointed, Mrs. Wigney, when I have to confess that I do not know Mr. Frantwood. It was a friend of his who asked me to come here to see you."

"Curious, but kind." The old lady looked mildly surprised, even a little amused. "But Australia is so very far off! I suppose very few people ever come from Australia to England."

"Mr. Frantwood seems anxious to know if you and Miss Wigney are quite"—she hesitated. Surely what she was doing went perilously near to being impertinent. But she went on bravely—"comfortable, Mrs. Wigney. He seems rather distressed that you never go away for a change," she looked pleadingly at her hostess.

"Neither my sister nor I wish for a change," said Mrs. Wigney rather stiffly. "We are quite comfortable here. We have a little garden, and Mr. Cutt kindly sends a gardener to see to it now and again. In the summer it is really very pleasant."

And then the door opened, and a woman of striking presence walked into the room.

Richenda Wigney was very unlike her delicate sister-in-law. She had been a very beautiful creature—and even now her tall figure was still supple and upright, her fair hair, if streaked with white strands, still abundant, and her grey eyes bright and clear. She did not suit this

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austere, simple old London room as the other lady suited it. And of her Mary Pechell felt suddenly afraid—afraid and on her guard. And yet Miss Wigney's first words were almost ludicrously like those of her sister-in-law, though uttered with far more vigour and decision.

"It is very good of you to have come so far to see two old women," she said. "And it is very pleasant to receive a friend of James Frantwood. Although he has never seen us—he is son to a cousin of Mrs. Wigney who went to Australia fifty years ago—he has been very kind, and that over a very long time. In fact"—she fixed her stern, sad eyes on Mary Pechell's face—"this gentleman of whom we know so little has been for long our only link with the outside world."

"You forget Mr. Cutt, Richenda." said Mrs. Wigney softly.

"No, I do not forget Mr. Cutt, Lucy! But I have never regarded Mr. Cutt as a link with the outside world. Mr. Cutt, like all good lawyers, is a non-conductor," said Miss Wigney.

She sat down; and then the two hostesses waited for their visitor to speak. But for a while Mary said nothing. She was fascinated by Miss Richenda Wigney, and she had the eerie sensation that they had met before, while knowing very well that this could not be so.

It was Mrs. Wigney who finally broke a silence Mary felt oppressive.

"James Frantwood again suggests, Richenda, that we should go away for a change. I have been explaining to Miss Pechell that we very much prefer to stay quietly here, in a place which has become home."

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Miss Wigney looked at her sister-in-law, and then she turned to Mary Pechell.

"When I was a young woman," she began, "I should have liked to have gone away—I mean far away, out of England. But in my time such a thing would not have been tolerated in a young lady. Now both my sister and I feel as though we were rooted here." She spoke with tragic emphasis, and Mary felt as if a window had suddenly been opened into the speaker's sombre and unquiet house of life.

"Even now," went on Miss Wigney, "I envy the girls, the women, I see streaming out to work each morning. I have seen some of them, nay, many of them, grow from youth to age as they passed our windows, from brown-haired girls to grey-haired women—but oh! how I have envied them the power of doing something——"

"Richenda! My dear?" Mrs. Wigney spoke reprovingly.

"Yes, Lucy, because *they* had work to do—they had no time to sit and eat their hearts out as less fortunate people have time to do."

"We have kept our health very well without going away," interposed Mrs. Wigney gently. "And we have noticed that those of our neighbours whom we know—we have become acquainted with two of the families who live in Larne Terrace—come back rather the worse than the better for their holidays."

A sudden smile irradiated Miss Richenda's face, and Mary told herself with a queer leap of the heart that now she knew of whom Miss Wigney reminded her. Richenda Wigney was very like some one Mary had come to know

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very well—some one who had become dangerously dear to Mary's heart.

"My cousin is not the only person who has kindly suggested that we should take a change," said Mrs. Wigney. "We have another friend, perhaps I should say acquaintance, who comes to see us sometimes. His name is Mannyton—I expect you've heard of Mr. Mannyton, my dear, for he seems to be a well-known person?"

Now, oddly enough, Mary had heard of Mr. Mannyton, or rather of *a* Mr. Mannyton. He was one of John Ryman's co-directors, a man whom she knew Ryman disliked and distrusted. But it was most unlikely that Mrs. Wigney's friend and this other Mannyton were one and the same person.

"Mr. Mannyton," went on Mrs. Wigney, "suggested this summer that we should go to Deal. He knows of most excellent lodgings there, kept by a man who was once a butler. We very nearly did go to Deal, for Mr. Mannyton is very positive. But when it came to the point we neither of us felt we wanted to go away."

And then again silence fell on the three women, and Mary Pechell, half reluctantly, rose from her chair. She felt that she had not accomplished what Richard Caryll had asked her to do. She was afraid he would be disappointed; also her heart, her kind, generous young heart, yearned over these two strange old women. She longed to bring some brightness and happiness into their still, monotonous lives. Perhaps it would be impossible to do anything of the kind for Mrs. Wigney, but how about Miss Richenda? She, it was clear, longed for something very different from the life she was now leading.

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"I hope you will allow me to come again," Mary said a little timidly. "It would be such a pleasure to me to come and see you sometimes. I am one of the people you envy, Miss Wigney, one of those who do something, and so I am a great deal in London."

"How long is it since you came back from Australia?" asked Miss Wigney abruptly.

"I have never been to Australia," Mary faltered.

And then Mrs. Wigney interposed in her quiet voice: "I forgot to tell you, Richenda, that Miss Pechell has never even seen James Frantwood. A friend of his asked her to come and see us."

"What an extraordinary thing!" said Miss Wigney shortly. "What a very extraordinary thing to do!" And Mary fancied that in the astonished face now bent on her she read suspicion—suspicion and a certain eager questioning.

But Mrs. Wigney again interposed, speaking with a kind of chill authority: "Not at all extraordinary, Richenda. On the contrary, very natural. My cousin could not come to England himself, so he deputed a friend to try and find out whether we were well and comfortable, and the friend, in his turn, deputed this young lady, who has very kindly carried out our cousin's wish. We can but thank her for the kind interest she has shown in us."

Mary Pechell felt herself dismissed. They both shook hands with her, and Miss Richenda went towards the curious early-Victorian steel fireplace and rang the bell.

And then something very untoward, very unexpected, and very disagreeable happened to Mary Pechell.

As she opened the door giving from the light-filled room

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into the dark hall she almost fell on Mrs. Tabb's broad bosom. The old servant had evidently been listening at the door, and when caught in the act had not even the grace to be ashamed. Shutting the door quickly, almost with a bang, on her two mistresses, she grasped Miss Pechell's arm.

"Tell me the truth," she whispered authoritatively—"I'm quite safe, Miss! You've come from *him*, haven't you? You've not come from Mr. Frantwood—that's just a lie!" She spoke in broken, hurried, urgent accents, and the grip of her strong, work-worn fingers tightened on Mary's arm.

And as Miss Pechell, abashed, frightened, even angry, made no answer, she went on breathlessly:

"I've always known he wasn't dead! He weren't the sort to kill himself—not while there was a fighting chance left in the world. Oh, Miss, for God's sake tell me how he is, and what he's doing! Write and say his Tabby never forgets him—no, not for one whole minute of her time. His mother—she's forgotten—but there, poor lady, you couldn't expect *her* to be always remembering!" She stopped to take breath, and then broke out again:

"Miss Richenda knows I mean to get the truth from you," she spoke in a low, fierce voice. "She said I might ask you."

"But indeed you're making a mistake," said Mary pitifully. "I have come—though in an indirect way—straight from Mr. Frantwood. He commissioned a friend to go and see Mrs. Wigney, and it was that gentleman who asked me to come here. I've never even been in Australia."

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And then Mrs. Tabb at last released her hold on Mary's arm.

"Then there's no more to say. I've been a fool," said Mrs. Tabb resentfully. "I thought I made sure that you came from"—she hesitated, and then, letting her voice sink to the lowest whisper, she uttered the words "Mr. Wigney."

"I've never even heard of Mr. Wigney!" cried Mary, really distressed. "I thought Mrs. Wigney was a widow."

"She had a son," said the woman in a low voice. "I was his nurse."

"But I thought he was dead—at least I was told only to-day that he had died under distressing circumstances," said Mary.

"I never believed—I never will believe—that he died when they said he did. You know his body was never found, Miss——" she spoke with passionate conviction. "And then when we began to get them handsome presents from Australia—well, I made more and more sure that it was he who was sending them. Miss Richenda, she thought so too, for a bit. Mr. Frantwood never took no notice—not to say notice—of Mrs. Wigney before my boy disappeared. I told Miss Richenda I'd get the truth out of you. But there, I'm an old fool, and I've made a mistake, as an old fool will. All I can do, Miss, is to beg humbly your pardon."

"I wish—I do wish I could have brought you good news," said Mary huskily. "But why did Mr. Wigney leave home—wasn't he happy? Mrs. Wigney looks so sweet and gentle——"

Mrs. Tabb hesitated, then she looked up into the kind young face.

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"He'd got into trouble," she said heavily, "bad trouble at his work. Mrs. Wigney don't know that. If he is alive he can't never come back—not if it was ever so."

She went forward and opened the front door. Again Mary Pechell felt she was being dismissed. She had done no good—no good at all—to these unhappy people; for she now realised that they were all, in their varying measure, very unhappy.

She walked quickly down the terrace, then looked round her surprised. The empty hansom cab was there, the driver standing by his horse, but there was no sign of Caryll.

"The gentleman had to go away, Miss. He gave me this note for you."

I know you will forgive me for leaving you to drive back alone. I will come, if you can spare time to see me, at five to-morrow afternoon on my way to Victoria. I shall be glad to take any messages or parcels for the Little House.

And as she stared down at the unsigned note, the tears rushed to her eyes as they had rushed the night before, but from a very different species of feeling. Now they were tears of anger, of hurt pride. She had never thought to find Richard Caryll unkind as well as, yes—discourteous. Mary Pechell suddenly felt very young, and very, very forlorn.

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CHAPTER XIV

John Ryman had now been in London three days. He had meant to wait four days before calling on Miss Pechell, but now that three days had gone by he told himself that that was quite long enough to satisfy both his self-esteem and his sense of caution.

This time last year he would have gone off to the little house in Westminster the very day of his return to town. But then last year he was only beginning to debate within himself whether Mary Pechell was or was not a suitable wife for the future owner of Halkham—and he had persuaded himself that it was his business to see as much of her as was possible before there came the moment when he must definitely make up his mind whether to make her an offer of marriage or refrain from doing so.

A year ago there were certain facts concerning Mary Pechell of which he, Ryman, gravely disapproved. He had always cherished a vague ideal of what his wife should be, and Miss Pechell, strange to say, was in no sense like that ideal. He had never approved of her connexion with the Home Workers. As to the principles of Home Work, and as to the rights of Home Workers, she had to a certain extent modified his views—views natural to the son of a man who had made a considerable fortune through the humble agency of factory operatives.

But even if she were fighting for a great and just principle, why should Miss Pechell—well-connected, dis-

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tinguished-looking, if not exactly pretty, and with a nice little fortune of her own—fight at all? It was the duty of men to deal with such questions—collectively in Parliament. True, the lot and daily bread of a great many women were affected, favourably or the reverse, by any new laws passed concerning remunerative work done in the worker's own house. But what had Miss Pechell to do with all that? The job of bettering the lot of the worker, if it is to be undertaken by women at all, is admirably suited, so John Ryman thought, for those plain and elderly persons who have nothing better to do with their time than to adopt some form of non-pauperizing good work.

Luckily Mary's work had not turned her into a "mannish woman." As Ryman walked down the Embankment he remembered with satisfaction how very nice she had looked at the Stane Palace dance—as nice as, in fact nicer than, any girl there. She had to the full the charm of youth, and yet she was more dignified, more staid, than her contemporaries. She had, too, such a beautiful skin, and such lovely hair. Ryman attached great importance to these points.

And she had made herself very pleasant to him at Stane. They had danced together three times, and she had quite gone back to her old easy manner with him. Ryman did not know, he was not the type of man even dimly to guess, what this had cost her in urgent calls on her pride, or how nearly the knowledge that he was to be at Stane Palace had made Miss Pechell stay away that night.

And then he had written to her two or three times, both before and since their meeting at the dance, as had become his wont when they were parted for any considerable num-

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ber of weeks. And she had answered at once, giving him news of herself, of her aunts, of Lady Susan.

In her last letter—quite a good, long letter—she had incidentally told him of the engagement of the prettiest and eldest of the Miss Segraves to Mr. Bateson, the clergyman. "I am very glad, for I think they will be very happy." He had wondered as he read the words whether any one would ever write a similar sentence in a letter concerning himself and Mary Pechell. Lady Susan thought yes—certainly. And Ryman had come to rely on Lady Susan's judgment of human beings, for he had found her very seldom wrong. He now remembered her advice—her advice to go slow. Well, he was going slow. He would call on Mary now, and then he would allow some days to slip by before he asked her to go out with him.

Ryman would have been surprised indeed had any one told him—what even Lady Susan could have told him—that after his offer and her rejection of it, Mary was not likely to accept his invitations in the old familiar way.

The office of the Home Workers closed at four—"Just like a bank," Mary had once innocently observed, and he had chuckled to himself. What an amateurish little concern it was! Still, he had to admit that the Society had done, from their point of view, some good. They had actually killed a Bill! He did not like to look back to that episode, for Mary Pechell had gone to the House of Commons and done some lobbying in person—she and two or three other ladies older than herself. Ryman had been very much put out about it, in fact thoroughly upset. The more so that some vulgar brute—an M. P. who did

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not know of Ryman's acquaintance with Miss Pechell had spoken of her—in a, well, in a very familiar way.

As he walked to Westminster from New Court, where he had spent an hour discussing an important foreign railway concession, John Ryman was in a happy, hopeful mood. London was pleasant this October. Pleasant and still very empty. It was most unlikely that any of Mary Pechell's friends were yet back in town. He would be able to see a good deal of her alone.

And this feeling of satisfaction endured for some time. Mary received him very gently, very kindly—indeed she was sincerely glad to see him. Their meeting at Stane Palace had been, from her point of view, a great success. Ryman had been his old self—cool, collected, argumentative.

And now, to-day, he was as she had always known him, with the exception of those odious emotional moments on the open down behind the Little House. His formal manner, the questions she had learnt to expect concerning the progress of the Home Workers, his solemn discussion of that piece of Halkham gossip, the engagement of Violet Segrave, gave her an agreeable sense of security.

It was difficult to realize that the man now sitting opposite to her, with his gloves, his hat, his stick in his hand—John Ryman was quite old-fashioned in his ways—was the same person whom she had seen before her tongue-tied, trembling with emotion, asking her—nay, commanding her—to become his wife! She told herself that he probably regretted what had then occurred as sincerely as she did herself. He had already been, so he told her, some time in London. This proved—Mary felt sure of

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that—that if he had ever been in love with her he was now well out of it. Last spring and summer he had come nearly every day.

She rang for tea.

"Mr. Caryll is coming in for a moment on his way to the station," she said quietly. And Ryman looked up, surprised and a little vexed.

"Caryll?" he exclaimed. "The man who has got Highways? I had no idea you knew him!"

"Of course I know him." Mary laughed. "He's Aunt Alice's friend quite as much as Lady Susan's. He brought me a hamper from the Little House when he arrived in London. I expect Aunt Alice asked him to bring it back empty!"

She felt suddenly ashamed—ashamed and unhappy. But Ryman believed her as implicitly as she had believed him when he had told her that he had been back in town "some time."

Ryman talked on and on—as happy as it was in his nature to be, satisfied that he was making himself very agreeable. But though his hostess smiled, and sometimes said a word or two, she did not really hear or understand what he was saying. She was listening, her whole being on the strain, for the sound of Caryll's cab coming up to the door—for his now familiar knock.

But when at last he did come, just after Big Ben had struck five, she was taken by surprise. He had walked, not driven to the door.

But if Mary was surprised, Caryll was even more surprised—surprised and angry that she should have another visitor at the same time as himself.

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Caryll had spent an anxious, wretched, stormy twenty-four hours, unable to fix his mind on anything but on the one now agonizing question of Miss Pechell's relation to John Ryman. Her burning blush, her sudden look of self-consciousness, had awakened him to his own danger. He had drifted, nay, fallen, into love, and that though he knew that marriage must not, and could not, be included in the life he had planned out with such glowing anticipations, which had begun so well.

Now he felt that existence at Highways would be intolerable, unbearable, if lived alone.

Till he had met Mary Pechell, he had never felt any need for a mate—for a companion who should be another self. But now, so strong was this need, this sensation of ownership in another human being, that the thought of Mary and Ryman roused in him certain savage, primitive instincts he had perhaps inherited from the man who had made of his dwelling a holocaust, a funeral pyre for the dead woman he had loved.

As he walked into the small panelled room and found Ryman established there, the shock of jealous pain drove out what should have been a far more vivid sensation, namely fear, from his heart. But fear was there, lurking in the background, adding an acrid humiliation to his more violent feeling. Richard Caryll was aware that a certain name—the name of Wigney—which might so easily and innocently be pronounced by Mary Pechell, might awake a very unpleasant echo in John Ryman's mind.

But he would be ready, quite ready, with what he meant to say if that name was uttered.

Mary Pechell, however, made no allusion to their joint

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expedition of the day before, and the talk was all of Halkham—of Halkham and Highways.

Caryll had allowed himself three-quarters of an hour when leaving his luggage at the station. But now he threw all thought of his train to the winds. However long he stayed, he meant to stay the other man out.

And at last, reluctantly, John Ryman rose to his feet. It was nearly six o'clock, and he had an appointment in his own rooms at six.

He had not meant to pay so long a call—and yet he went very much against his will. Angrily he told himself that Caryll had no knowledge of social usages. There the man sat, in Miss Pechell's largest, most comfortable arm-chair, looking as if nothing would dislodge him, and apparently thinking it quite reasonable, having a spare hour or more to put in somewhere on his way to a station, to come and bore a lady with whom he was but slightly acquainted.

But, seeing Ryman move, Caryll sprang up readily enough, and for a moment Ryman hoped the other was leaving too.

But no; all Caryll said was, "I suppose we shall meet soon, Mr. Ryman, for I shall be down some time at Highways. Next time you are at Halkham, I hope you will walk over and see me, as you promised to do the last time we met—at Stane Palace."

And Ryman accepted the invitation with what grace he could muster.

"I suppose you are staying on in town now?" he said to Mary.

"Yes, I shall only go away for a very few days—so

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as to be at the Little House for Aunt Rose's birthday. I always spend Aunt Rose's birthday there."

And then, at last, and to the great relief of the other two, John Ryman took himself off. He did not feel inclined to invite her in Richard Caryll's presence to accompany him to a play.

They both waited till the sound of Ryman's firm footfalls echoed on the cobbles outside, and then Mary said very quietly, "I'm afraid Mr. Ryman made you miss your train."

"Yes, I've missed my train." And then he stopped short; he was trying to find the words with which he should ask her if she was going to marry John Ryman.

"I did not like to speak of my visit to Mrs. Wigney before one who is a stranger to you," she said a little breathlessly. "But now that we're alone, let me tell you all about it. It won't take long."

He was looking at her fixedly, and Mary hurried on: "I fear you will be disappointed, Mr. Caryll. Neither Mrs. Wigney nor her sister-in-law desires to have any kind of holiday. They both said that they kept well without a change."

His eyes fell before her clear, eager, guileless gaze.

"But you thought them well, comfortable?" he asked mechanically.

She hesitated—a look of perplexity, almost of distress, came over her face.

"Mrs. Wigney seems well, and on the whole happy," she answered. "But I could not help feeling very sorry for Miss Wigney. She seemed to long for something to do.

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She spoke with such envy of people who worked. And then the old servant, Mr. Caryll! I had such a curious little talk with her. She actually imagined that poor Mrs. Wigney's son—the one who died so long ago—is still alive. I had quite a difficulty in convincing her that I had not come from him."

And then the man sitting opposite to her got up. This was more than he had bargained for; it made him feel what he had sometimes, alas! already felt in the presence of Mary Pechell—ashamed, ashamed and mean. He must get away, as far as might be, from that pathetic little household of three women at Islington.

"Miss Pechell," he said abruptly, "I have a question to ask you. I trust to our friendship to excuse it."

She looked up at him surprised, not knowing in the least what he was about to say.

"Yes?" she said. "Yes, Mr. Caryll?"

"They say at Halkham that you are going to marry Mr. John Ryman. Is that true?"

And Mary also got up. Facing him, she answered very quietly, as if he had asked a most natural question:

"No, it is not true." And then, deliberately, she added the words, "It has never been true."

For a long moment neither spoke, and then suddenly she found herself in Caryll's arms, strained to his heart, listening with exquisite content to his ardent, masterful words of love, of passionate gratitude.

Not five minutes before, as she had been painting in hesitating, simple words her picture of the three lonely, far from happy, old women, whom she had gone to see

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at his wish, a noble impulse had come over Caryll—an impulse to share part of his burden, as also to put what had become a terrible temptation for ever out of reach.

But after she had answered so quietly and coldly his question as to Ryman, they had exchanged one of those searching, probing looks which in moments of high emotion rend veils, make dark things plain, bare the soul as much as the soul can be bared. With a stifled, half-incredulous, rapturous cry, "My God, she loves me!" Caryll had yielded to a temptation which only then had become irresistible.

But even as he was yielding, he swore to himself the while that no harm, no evil, should ever touch the woman he loved. He reminded himself piteously that even in our hard laws there are many statutes of limitation. There was surely little fear—practically no fear at all—that the wrong he had done years before would ever come up and smite her through him.

But even so, it was with a sharp sense of relief that he heard Mary say that she wished, for the present, to say nothing to the little world of people with whom they both, in very varying measure, counted. Strange, indeed, that such a matter should ever be the business of any but of the two only who are concerned. In this it seemed, as indeed in everything else, they two were one—one in thought, theory, and ideal.

Once, twice, three times he tried to tell her so much at least as would clear his conscience of having told her nothing, but the words he tried to utter stayed on his lips. They would tell too much, or else they would tell far—far too little. And at last Mary stopped him with the words

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so many lovers have uttered and will utter, unknowing of their small or serious import: "Don't tell me things for which you are ashamed or sorry. I would rather not know."

At last she put on her hat and they went out together for a walk. All thought of leaving London till she had left it too had gone from Caryll.

They dined together in happy solitude at a little restaurant, for the dining-hour of ordinary folk was long past. And then, as he was taking her home Caryll insisted on going into one of those pawnbrokers who stay open late for the convenience of the poor, and there he bought a birthday present for Miss Rose—two curious old-fashioned pearl earrings mounted as pins.

"She'll think they are from you," he said. "But the gift will be from us both—the first gift we shall ever have given to any one together shall be to dear Miss Rose, and it will bring us luck!"

And she had laughed. "No, it's your gift—yours only!"

And as he had pushed the three pounds across the counter Caryll suddenly wondered whether Mary had any conception of how great a part money—the lack of it, the longing for it—plays in life. In theory she knew the value of money well, no woman more. Was she not always listening to the plaints of those to whom money means more than to almost any class of the community—the gently bred Home Workers? But in practice—ah! no. Mary Pechell was one of the few happy people who, born on the high tableland of security, have no real knowledge of what the lack of money means to the great majority of men and women.

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CHAPTER XV

Miss Rose always came down each morning some time before Miss Alice. Given the nature of the two sisters—one so strong, so determined, and the other so gentle and yielding—it was strange that it should be so. But Miss Rose had always been a very early riser, and years ago, when she had been terribly unhappy, she had fallen into the way of coming down and doing an hour's work in the garden before breakfast.

That quiet, busy hour had seemed to soothe her, to make her forget for the time being her great trouble during these days and weeks of acute unhappiness. And now time, with its merciful finger, had blotted out the dark bitter stain—to such a woman as was the younger of the two Misses Charnwood the disgrace—of being jilted in the cruel way she had been jilted.

Years had now gone by since the two sisters had last spoken of the matter to one another, and then it had been Miss Rose who had shown Alice in silence the couple of lines in the *Morning Post* which recorded the death of her one-time lover's wife. On that occasion Miss Alice had broken out, in a low, fierce, suppressed tone: "I hope that woman made him as wretched as he deserved to be!" And though a feeble protest had risen to Miss Rose's trembling lips, she had answered nothing. She knew that it was her sister's love for her that prompted those savage, unjust words.

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But though everything else was changed; though the money had come which would have made just the difference to faithless Alick Stair; and though from being a young woman she had grown old—still Miss Rose kept up her early morning habit; and still, during the summer months of the year, half past six would often find her in the garden.

Last night she had not slept well, and so on this fine early October morning she had got up even earlier than usual.

In a humble and most unostentatious way, Rose Charnwood was a religious woman. Her favourite author was George Herbert; and to-day, as she filled her little watering-can again and again, bringing to her task much the same kind of care and earnestness which a thoughtful child might have done, her mind went over and over again a phrase she had read the night before. "There is an hour wherein a man might be happy all his life could he but find it."

She dimly apprehended, in a sense her elder sister could never have done, what George Herbert had meant by this strange phrase, and she was still meditating on the matter when she saw the parlourmaid coming towards her with a letter on the salver.

Now Miss Rose received very few letters, but sometimes her niece Mary wrote to her a long, gossiping, amusing letter. She hoped this was not from dear Mary to say that anything had prevented her from coming, as she was expected to do, that evening.

"Please, Miss, postman says he had to deliver the letter at the Rectory, as it was addressed there, but that they

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ought to have given it him back at once"—the girl spoke rather breathlessly, and Miss Rose glanced down at the envelope.

In a neat, cramped, masculine handwriting was written, "Miss Rosamund Charnwood, The Rectory, Halkham." Why, it was seventeen years since that address had been hers!

Miss Rose stared down at the envelope with eyes which became filmy with agitation.

She put the watering-can she held in her other hand down on the ground at her feet, and she turned the letter over and over again to give herself time to think—to gather her thoughts and piteous memories together.

Across the flap of the envelope was printed in bold blue letters, "The Ditch Haven Hotel."

With a blind wish to get away from the house, she walked, with short, quick steps, to a hidden part of the garden, and there at last, with eyes smarting with unshed tears, and with hands that shook, she opened the envelope and drew out what it contained.

Instinctively she looked first at the signature. Yes—she had not been mistaken. "Yours very truly, Alexander Stair." The note bore the date of two days before, and was written on the hotel paper of the little watering-place which, within the memory of both the writer and of Miss Rose, had been a tiny seaside village.

DEAR MISS CHARNWOOD,—

I hear that you are still living at Halkham. That being so, may I ask your permission to come and pay my respects? I am anxious to introduce to you my poor motherless boy. From birth upwards he has not been mentally strong. The doctors call it a case of arrested

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development. But he is a good, unselfish fellow, and but for him I should be lonely indeed.

Unless I hear from you to the contrary, I propose driving over on Saturday afternoon. We shall be with you about four o'clock.

Yours very truly,

ALEXANDER STAIR.

There was a postscript:

I hear my kinswoman, Lady Susan Baliol, is still living. We might, perhaps, go on there from you.

Miss Rose read the letter through twice more, and then she put it back in the envelope, and pushed the envelope carefully into her pocket.

How wise Alice had been to scout the notion, timidly suggested by the Dilchester dressmaker who made their gowns, that they should do without pockets, as was the fashion of the moment! She, Rose, with her love of pretty clothes, would have given in, but Alice had said firmly that they would certainly continue to have pockets.

And then a look of fear came into Miss Rose's blue eyes. Why—why Alick would be here this very afternoon! He could not be stopped from coming now excepting by a telegram.

Suddenly Miss Rose realized that, were her sister to learn of the proposed visit, such a telegram would certainly be sent. Alice always meant to act for the best, but she would not understand this matter at all. Why, Alice had never even been in love!

Miss Rose clasped her hands together with a gesture that with her denoted great agitation. She told herself that it would cause her agony—yes, agony and shame—were such an insult to be put on the man whom she had

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loved so dearly—and who she knew, deep in her tender heart, had loved her almost as dearly as she had loved him, in the long long ago.

His formal letter was to her full of a terrible pathos. Was it not an appeal to forgive and forget? She had long ago forgiven, and she told herself that now she would forget. Why should not he and she become kindly acquaintances for the very short time that Alick—he was Colonel Stair now—and his son were likely to be at Ditch Haven? She did not in the least understand the phrase "arrested development," but it was clear the lad—Alick's "poor motherless boy"—was in some way ailing.

At last Miss Rose turned and walked slowly towards the house. She was determined to force her sister to receive Colonel Stair, but she did not in the least know how to set about it.

And then, just after the gong for prayers had sounded, something happened which Miss Rose was able to regard as a direct interposition of Providence on her behalf.

"I am going into Dilchester this afternoon, cook, so will you please prepare the list of which I spoke to you yesterday? Miss Mary's train does not arrive till half-past five, and I shall have plenty of time to go out to Natchell Farm about those chickens." So quoth Miss Alice on her way to read morning prayers.

Miss Rose waited till the three maids and the boy had filed into the dining-room, then she guiltily slipped in and knelt down by her sister.

She had never deceived or attempted to deceive Alice before, and it seemed to her that her deceit, her secret knowledge of what was going to happen that afternoon, a

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happening which would so terribly anger and disturb her sister, must be written on her face.

But no, when prayers were over, and they were both about to begin breakfast, Alice seemed to remark nothing in the least unusual or untoward about her submissive companion.

"Mary tells me that she will arrive at Dilchester about half-past five," she said briskly, "so I may as well do all the things I have to do there to-day. Would you like to come too, Rose? There will be plenty of room. Mary is only bringing a bag."

"No, I would rather stop at home," said Miss Rose in a low voice.

And then for the first time Miss Charnwood looked up and across at her sister.

"Don't you feel well?" she asked sharply. "Have you a headache, Rose?"

"Yes," said Rose, blushing—she still blushed often and easily—"I have a slight headache this morning, sister. I think I had better stay quietly at home."

And though it was true that her head ached, she was overwhelmed with shame at the thought of her duplicity.

The long morning had worn itself away. While Miss Alice was down in the village, Miss Rose read Colonel Stair's letter so often that she knew it by heart. Up to the last moment she feared with a nervous dread that something might prevent her sister from starting for Dilchester.

But nothing untoward happened, and now, at last, Miss Rose actually stood at the door seeing her off.

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Miss Charnwood stepped up into the little pony carriage which had been the first tangible sign of the sisters' greatly increased prosperity.

"You ought to be lying down, Rose! You look rather pale. Lie down till tea"—so rang out the peremptory order, for the speaker suddenly realized that her sister somehow looked to-day unlike her usual placid self. Her face seemed strained and worn. One of her cheeks was redder than the other.

There suddenly came across Miss Alice's mind a feeling of unease and self-rebuke. Perhaps dear Rose didn't have enough change. As a girl she had been quite a gadabout, indeed Rose had been, in a gentle way, the gayest of the gay till that—that—*traitor* was the word Miss Alice always applied in her own mind to Alexander Stair—had come and done all the mischief.

At the time it had happened more than one critical busybody had whispered how strange it was that Rose—happy, rather childish little Rose—had taken the thing so much to heart. But even after all these years Alice herself never forgot what had happened. It had cut too deeply into her own life—this jilting of the sister who had been like her child.

And now, on this autumn afternoon, during the six miles' drive into Dilchester, the old wound reopened. How horrible and how—how mysterious that an episode which had seemed so slight, so comparatively unimportant a matter to most of their friends, should have twisted and deflected, not only her sister's but her own, Alice's, life! It had given the elder of the two a deep, wordless distrust and fear of men.

Alice Charnwood had been eight-and-twenty at the time

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of poor Rose's tragedy, and a fine, vigorous young woman, well used to doing that which seemed right to herself. So it was that on the day following that on which Alick Stair's letter breaking off his engagement had arrived, laden with anguish and remorse, at Halkham Rectory, she had gone up to London and seen him.

The humiliation and angry pain of that interview remained present with her to this day. Young Stair had been cold, courteous, immovable; and when at last he had shown some feeling, it was only to declare—and it was this Alice Charnwood had never forgiven—that he was sacrificing himself for Rose's sake!

The pony stumbled, and Miss Alice gave the pampered beast a sharp flick on the under side. She reminded herself that it was no use casting one's mind back to what were best forgotten.

Still, all the same, Rose looked as if she ought to have a change.

The two ladies had a cousin, one of those cousins who are almost like sisters, married in the North of England. Miss Charnwood made up her mind that she would write to this cousin and ask her to invite Rose to pay her a long visit. Miss Rose was very fond of young people, and there was a household of young people in the North, boys and girls who were devoted to their Aunt Rose, as they always called her, but who had only a respectful esteem for their Aunt Alice.

And the object of all this kind, sisterly solicitude?

Miss Rose, with a great weight lifted off her heart, went back into the house and into the kitchen.

"Cook," she asked diffidently, "is there any kind of

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nice teacake you can make very quickly? A gentleman and his little son are coming to see me this afternoon. I should also like to have two kinds of jam, and perhaps a little honey, cook."

Cook had already let her fire go down, but Miss Rose spoke so kindly and gently that she had not the heart to disappoint her.

"Certainly, Miss," she said quickly. "Tea at five, Miss?"

"No," said Miss Rose, hesitatingly, "I think we had better have tea at half-past four. My friends will be here at four. The gentleman was a valued young acquaintance of my dear father, and so I should like his little boy to make a good tea."

From the kitchen she wandered up to her bedroom. It was a pretty, old-fashioned room, with a charm reflecting that of its gentle, refined occupant. Almost everything in that room, from the patchwork quilt on the bed to the high footstool on the hearthrug, was a gift from some one who loved Miss Rose. Alice thought it far too "cluttered up" with useless ornaments and unimportant trifles, but each ornament, each trifle, held some pleasant or intimate association for its owner.

Miss Rose was most easily led by those about her, and there were some who said she never knew her own mind, but in one matter she always had her way and knew what she wanted, and that concerned her dress.

After having looked out of the window down into the garden for five minutes, she suddenly turned away, and going straight to the gentleman's mahogany wardrobe—for which she had pleaded when they moved into the Little

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House, because it reminded her of her father—she took out of it a black-and-grey lace dress.

It was such a pretty gown.

"Black and grey? I never heard of such an odd combination!" Miss Alice had exclaimed when her sister had been discussing, or rather choosing, the soft iron-grey silk over which was to be draped a fine black lace shawl. "And in any case, Rose, do choose a light grey! It isn't as if we were in mourning. That dull smoky-looking colour won't show our dear mother's lace up one bit!"

But Miss Rose had had her own way, and even Miss Alice had been forced to admit that the result was satisfactory.

This gown, and the French lace cap which was just now her most cherished, because her latest, possession—Rose Charnwood had remained in some ways very much a child—completed the costume in which she meant to receive Alexander Stair.

But as she stood before the long cheval glass, which was the only ugly thing in the room, Miss Rose, with a sudden impulsive gesture, shut out the sight reflected there. She covered her face with her hands—hands which remained as soft and white as some women's hands do remain long after youth has left them—and the tears rushed to her eyes.

How she was changed! How terribly she was changed! And the cruel, strange thing was that in herself she was not so very different from the young girl Alick Stair had loved, and, alas! taught to love.

With a very full, sad heart Miss Rose went over to her dressing-table, and taking a small embroidered handker-

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chief out of a drawer dabbed her eyes with Eau de Cologne —a present brought her from Germany last year by her dear young cousin, "Parson Joe," as he was rather irreverently called in the family.

And the fact that kind, thoughtful Joe was a clergyman at once brought Heaven to Miss Rose's mind. And very soberly she reminded herself that if not here on earth, then at some future, determined time, she and Alick Stair must at last have met, both changed and worn by the slow passage of years, in Heaven.

That being so, it was doubtless just as well that their meeting should take place now, on earth.

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CHAPTER XVI

The seven miles of winding country lanes and road which separate the ugly modern seaside town of Ditch Haven from beautiful old-world Halkham rise all the way, and at last Colonel Stair began to feel that the journey in the cumbersome, old-fashioned landau, which was the only vehicle he had been able to procure on this fine Saturday afternoon, was becoming intolerably long.

True, he and his companion were now within sight of the village which lay as if cradled in a fold of the downs; and he could even distinguish, or so he thought, the gabled roof of the house, Halkham Rectory, for which he was bound. But at the pace the two weary horses were now going he told himself impatiently that they couldn't be there for another half hour.

He made up his mind—Colonel Stair was a man of action, and very quick at making up his mind—that it would be better for him and his son, Johnnie, to get out of the carriage at the bottom of the hill. He remembered a short cut which had existed some thirty years ago across what were then known as the Rectory Fields.

"Stop!" he cried sharply; and, as the driver drew up obediently, he stood up in the carriage, his figure almost as active, if not quite as lithe and graceful, as had been that of the young subaltern who had spent so memorable a summer here thirty odd years ago.

"There's some kind of an inn close here where you

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could put up, isn't there? I think we'd better walk up into the village. I daresay we shall be an hour, perhaps an hour and a half. We'll come back here when we want you."

Colonel Stair had not forgotten his intention of taking his son to call on old Lady Susan at Halkham House.

"All right, sir. You'll find me over there at 'The Case is Altered.'"

Colonel Stair opened the stiff carriage door.

"Come, Johnnie," he exclaimed rather urgently. "Rouse yourself, my boy! It will do you good to have a little walk. I said we would be at the Rectory by four, and it's four now."

The big, lumbering-looking youth—he was four-and-twenty, but looked far younger—obediently followed his father out of the carriage.

"Let me see——" said Colonel Stair to himself, "yes—the fields ran down here, across this bit of common"—and he started walking at a smart pace along a path leading through the gorse and blackberry bushes.

As he did so he looked this way and that, his eyes almost as keen and clear as in the long ago days when he had captured the heart of young Rose Charnwood.

The thirty odd years which had gone by since then had modified Alexander Stair as thirty odd years of life cannot but modify even the most positive of human beings. But what had really altered his whole conception of life, and deflected it as nothing else could have done, was the peculiar mental condition of his only child. He might have hated poor Johnnie—such tragic hatreds between parents and afflicted children are more usual than the

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careless world in its happy blindness is willing to believe—but instead, and most fortunately for himself, Colonel Stair loved the son of whom he could never hope to be proud with a jealous, painful love. To him also he was ever infinitely good and patient.

Of late, perhaps because he was getting old and not feeling as well in health as he had done, an awful dread, a fear he refused to face plainly, was always rising wraith-like before Colonel Stair.

What would happen to Johnnie—to Johnnie, who would be quite sufficiently dowered with wealth to make him a valuable prey to certain types of men and women—were anything to happen to Johnnie's father? The young fellow's mental peculiarities had naturally alienated his parents' acquaintances, and prevented Colonel Stair from making new ones.

The father and son now led a life very remote from their fellows. They wandered about from hotel to hotel, generally choosing a place which was beautiful as well as healthy, for Colonel Stair was blessed—or cursed—with a great appreciation of nature and of beauty. Occasionally some charitable soul among his sometime fellow officers sent them an invitation to join a cheery shooting party, but the next time—if there was a next time—Colonel Stair and his boy would be asked when no other guests happened to be there.

And yet, as the father often reminded himself resentfully, there was nothing really objectionable about Johnnie Stair; he was gentle, pathetically obedient, amenable to the lightest word of reproach or advice. But he was peculiar—even the Colonel admitted that to himself, though

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never to other people. Thus the art of reading still presented curiously insurmountable difficulties to Johnnie's mind, and though he *could* write a letter, it was the letter of a painstaking boy of eight or nine. And whereas a boy of eight or nine, if moderately intelligent, can compose his own letter, Johnnie's letters had to be dictated to him, and each word patiently spelt out.

Sometimes of late Alexander Stair felt as if he would have given all he had in the world for one true friend with whom he could discuss his secret anxieties, and who would sympathize with him in the hopes and fears induced by Johnnie's varying states of mind and body.

The two had been at the Ditch Haven Hotel for nearly a week when a good-natured woman who had almost forced her slight acquaintance on the father and son mentioned Halkham village.

"I was there in lodgings last year after my little girl had had scarlet fever," she said to Colonel Stair, "but though the place is pretty and very healthy, I found it dreadfully dull! We went there because our doctor said that if I could only get lodgings in Halkham no place would do the child so much good."

And then Colonel Stair, acting on a sudden impulse, had asked:

"Do you know if some people of the name of Charnwood still live at Halkham? Thirty years ago the parson there was named Charnwood, but I should think he must have died long ago."

"Why, yes, the clergyman at Halkham is called Charnwood," the lady had answered, "but he's quite a young man. There's also a Miss Rose Charnwood, whom I shall

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always remember most gratefully, for she was quite angelic to my little girl. She used to come and play with the child —all kinds of stupid games. I can't tell you how good she was! Oh yes, the Charnwoods are quite a dynasty in Halkham, but Miss Rose was the only one I really grew to know well. She's such a darling old thing!"

"Old thing?"—the two words gave Colonel Stair a shock, and a most unpleasant shock. He knew Rose Charnwood's age to a day. She would be fifty-seven next week, on the nineteenth of October. He was older—five and a half years older. Was it conceivable that any one could describe *him* as "an old thing," or speak of him even as an old man?

And then, giving himself no time to change his mind, he had sat down at the writing-table in the ugly hotel drawing-room and written his note to Rose Charnwood.

He told himself that at their time of life it would be quite easy to renew the old acquaintance, the old friendship, on a different level. He pictured Miss Rose as a faded, worn replica of the girl he had known, content, as one with so sweet a nature would doubtless school herself to be content, with the position of maiden aunt in the Rectory where she had been born, where she had known love, and where she had been left forlorn.

It was a touching little picture, and it moved Colonel Stair. Almost a generation had gone by since he had behaved so badly to Rose Charnwood, but he knew, all too well, that she was not the type of woman who bears malice.

Unacknowledged, but none the less deeply felt, was the conviction that it would be a good thing for Johnnie to

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know Rose Charnwood—Rose, who had been so sweet a type of the English girl of her day—Rose, who had been so exquisitely innocent, so harmlessly, so bewitchingly gay.

Poor Johnnie knew very few ladies. His mother had possessed a vast circle of acquaintances, but no one friend sufficiently attached to bear with her only child's peculiarities.

And then Colonel Stair, perhaps unwisely, had more or less quarrelled with his wife's relations.

Yes, he and Johnnie, especially Johnnie, were terribly alone in the world. The father could not afford, from a feeling of foolish pride or shame, to neglect any old friend who might be useful now, or in the hereafter, to his boy.

And then as the two days had gone by, bringing no answer from Rose Charnwood, his mind had a little misgiven him. Greatly as his pride had been humbled, he was still a proud man. It was true that he had said if he did not hear from her he would come. But as he remembered Rose Charnwood she had been very carefully trained in all social observances by a very strict father and elder sister. Such a person does not leave a letter unanswered.

It was possible, of course, that she might be away from Halkham just now. She was evidently a woman who made friends easily, and who was probably popular with a large circle. . . .

This thought again occurred to him when he and Johnnie reached the once familiar stile. It made him glad that he had left the carriage at the bottom of the hill. It would be quite simple to walk up to the door of the Rectory, ask if Miss Charnwood were there, and, if he was denied, go without even leaving his card.

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They were now walking up the field path along which, at the age his son now was, he had so often hurried, trying to take no thought for the morrow, intent only on the coming moments' rapture, for he had been—how incredible the fact seemed now—madly in love with poor, pretty Rose Charnwood.

And the path and place held other memories for the man who was now walking so soberly through the Rectory Fields.

It was down here that he had plunged, with bent head and heart full of bitterness, anguish, and shame, after what he had thought would be his last visit to Halkham.

A long unbroken journey from Scotland had been preceded by an interview in which his father had shown him, with hard, relentless logic, that untold years would have to be lived through before a marriage with this English clergyman's daughter would be reasonably possible.

He had come straight on from London meaning to tell her that everything must be at end, and then—then he had lacked the cruel courage needed. Instead, knowing they were together for the last time, he had been less restrained than ever before in the expression of his passion, and Rose—his poor, trusting little love—had clung to him, if frightened, then also submissive and adoring.

With a few vague words of parting which had dismayed, but not shaken, her faith in him, he had left her, making his way blindly down this unfrequented field path—and once on the common he had wandered about, losing count of time, uncaring of the fact that he was on his way to catch an express at Cleeping.

Not till the next day had he written the letter telling

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Rose that, as his father not only could do nothing more for him, but had declared his intention of stopping his already meagre allowance, there was nothing for it but for them to give each other up.

And now, as his emotional memory brought before him that last time he had been to Halkham Rectory, Alexander Stair suddenly remembered, with a sharp feeling of misgiving, the existence of Alice Charnwood—Alice, with whom he had had a short but unforgettable interview in the London hotel whence he had written to Rose.

Even now his cheeks burned at the recollection of her stinging, pleading words. She had said, very absurdly, that Rose would die—but at the time the threat had not sounded absurd, and her threat, her warning, had added almost intolerably to his torment.

Luckily he knew that one of Rose's two sisters had made a good if a late marriage, and at the time he had heard the news he had told himself that it must be Alice. She had been a clever, high-spirited, handsome young woman. As for the third sister—her name he remembered had been Mary—she was six years younger than Rose, and, at the time he had been so constantly here, a plain little girl of thirteen. It was good to reflect that Alice, his old enemy, was probably living far from Halkham.

Colonel Stair's mind shot off to Lady Susan Baliol. She had played a part—not a kindly, though a quite honest part—in the affair. Very early in the day she had warned him that no good could come of his constant visits to the Rectory, and of his foolish attraction to Rose Charnwood. But he had paid no heed to her admonitions.

Lady Susan must be of a very great age by now, and so

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almost certain to be at home, though not, so Colonel Stair said to himself, certain to be in a state to receive visitors.

During the last two days he had talked a great deal of Halkham to his son.

"Johnnie," he said, turning to him now, "do you know where we are going, my boy?"

"Yes, father," answered Johnnie, uncertainly.

"You know the name of this village, Johnnie? And the name of the lady, my old friend, whom we are going to see?"

Johnnie looked at him with an expression of distress.

"I—I'm not quite sure, father."

Colonel Stair sighed—a sharp, quick sigh. "Halkham! The name of this place is Halkham, my boy, and the name of my old friend is Rose, or rather Rosamund Charnwood. Will you try and remember that name, Johnnie? I want her to like you—I want you and she to be friends."

"I think we shall be friends, father, if she's a friend of yours."

Johnnie's face lit up, as it sometimes did light up, with a sudden look of comprehension and sympathy.

Colonel Stair felt a stir at his heart. One great doctor —but only one among many—had spoken as if Johnnie might some day get, well—more like other people. It seemed to the father to be a good omen that Johnnie just now had seized on his meaning—nay, more, had actually so far put two and two together that he saw reason why his father's friend should be his friend too. After all, it was quite natural that the lad should forget the name of Halkham, a name he had never heard till two days before.

"Will there be any dogs?" asked young Stair nervously.

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"Let me see," said Colonel Stair absently.

Rose had had a dog in the old days, an absurd Aberdeen terrier called Juno, but Juno must have died unnumbered years ago.

"There's not in the least likely to be a dangerous dog," he answered reassuringly. "You see, all sorts of people come to a rectory, so you may be quite sure, Johnnie, that any dog they keep is a good-natured beast."

But poor Johnnie did not look or feel reassured. He had a nervous horror of dogs—of dogs and horses; and this was almost the only fact about him which really irritated his father. Colonel Stair as a young man had been passionately fond of horses and a great lover of dogs.

A boy came whistling along the path from the village, and Colonel Stair stopped him. "Can you tell me," he said, "if Miss Rose Charnwood is at the Rectory?"

The boy pulled off his cap. He was a well-mannered, pleasant-looking lad, and Johnnie Stair looked at him longingly. That was the sort of boy with whom poor Johnnie liked to play. Unluckily he was now so much bigger and stronger than the sort of little chaps whose occupations alone he enjoyed.

"I don't think so," said the boy hesitatingly. "Of course, Miss Rose may be at the Rectory just now, but I should think she would be at the Little House at this time of the afternoon."

"At the Little House?" said Colonel Stair inquiringly. "Do you mean—of course you must mean the house which forms the corner of the way to the downs?"

"Of course I do," said the boy, staring at him. "Miss Rose Charnwood lives there, you know. She does not live at the Rectory."

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"No, I didn't know that she lived there," said Colonel Stair. "I thank you very much."

"There *is* a Rose Charnwood at the Rectory," volunteered the boy with a funny little twinkle in his eye. "But she's only nine years old, so I don't suppose you can mean *her*——"

And Colonel Stair laughed; it was the first time he had laughed that day.

"No, no," he said. "I mean——" he hesitated——

"You mean the Miss Rose who is an old lady?" said the boy readily. "She's always lived at the Little House—at any rate as long as we've been here."

And he ran on, waiting politely till he believed himself to be out of earshot before he started whistling again.

The father and son were now at the stile which brought them straight on to the village street.

"There's the Rectory, just opposite to where we are now, Johnnie," said Colonel Stair, with a queer catch in his voice. "That's the house where I spent a very happy summer when I was a young man, and where I got to know the lady we're going to see to-day, Johnnie, my boy."

"The garden isn't very large, father," said Johnnie timidly. "It isn't as large as the garden of our hotel at Ditch Haven."

Colonel Stair looked round. He was glad Johnnie remembered the name of the place where they were staying. And then he gazed over at the garden which was so curiously little changed, though some of the trees had grown surprisingly bigger.

"No, it isn't a large garden, Johnnie, but it's a very pretty garden," he said, "and I never thought it too small in the old days. There's a nice old walled kitchen garden

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behind those trees. I see there's a tennis net in front of the house. In my time we used to play croquet there. But we are not going to the Rectory to-day, Johnnie——"

And somehow he was very glad that they were not going to the Rectory. It would have been very painful to him, as also, he supposed, to Rose Charnwood—they both grown old, and he with Johnnie by his side—to meet in the familiar drawing-room, or in the still more memoried dining-room which, during the brief weeks that their engagement had lasted, had been kept sacred to them by common consent.

Quickly the father and son skirted the low Rectory wall and started walking up the steep village street.

Colonel Stair became quite silent. To his eyes everything looked just the same, and yet, or perhaps because of that, he felt like a ghost.

All the Halkham people he had known during that long vanished summer—and the young Scots soldier had become acquainted with a good many of the village people, for Rose was a great favourite among them, and all the world loves a lover—must either be dead now, or grown old as he himself had grown old.

He hurried his son along. "Walk quicker, Johnnie. We're late, my boy!"

The Little House? Curiously enough he had never been inside the Little House, though he had been quite familiar with the outside of it. But at the time he had been coming and going so often to Halkham the place had been in the occupation of an eccentric old bachelor who had no liking for young people.

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CHAPTER XVII

The father and son walked up the drive of the Little House and rang the bell; and then there came over the elder of the two a feeling of desperate unease. He experienced a sensation with which even as a young man he had not often been troubled.

Colonel Stair felt shy. He began to hope that Rose Charnwood would be away from Halkham; and that thus they each would be spared what he suddenly felt would be a painful, and to him a shame-filled, ordeal.

Rose, the young Rose Charnwood, had been very emotional, with as many moods as an April day. It was this wayward charm, even more than her beauty, which had carried the shrewd, ambitious young soldier off his feet. But what had been so endearing, so enchanting in the girl of nineteen would be odious and grotesque in a woman of fifty-seven.

The door opened, and, in a moment, by the kindly look on the maid's face, Colonel Stair saw that he was expected—though she glanced a little doubtfully towards his companion.

"Miss Rose is in the garden, sir," she said, and led the way through the broad corridor, filled with pretty old pieces of furniture which seemed dimly familiar to him, to the door giving into the garden.

For what seemed a very long moment, the elder of Miss Rose's two visitors only saw a wide expanse of green lawn bounded by a brilliant belt of autumn flowers. And then

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in a flash he became aware that to the left, under the shade of a spreading evergreen oak, stood a low table, gay with bright silver, and spread out with plates of bread and butter, cakes, and jam. . . .

Not till Colonel Stair and his son were close up to the table did there rise from behind the tray the still graceful, if now rather plump figure of Rose Charnwood.

"Colonel Stair and Mr. Stair," said the maid, and Miss Rose held out her little hand.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said very quietly, and as she spoke there was no tremor in her gentle voice. "And so this is your son, Alick? I expected to see a little boy," and then she smiled—such a bright, friendly little smile—at Johnnie.

And Colonel Stair—it was a long time since any woman had called him Alick, the late Mrs. Stair had always known him as Alexander—gave a brief nod.

With surprise and confusion he found he could not reply in words to the kind greeting.

Women, so he told himself fiercely in the brief moment it took him to get rid of that queer feeling in his throat, were certainly lacking in real sentiment. Here was he, moved to the bottom of his dry old heart by his meeting with the only woman he had ever loved, but she had been quite content to greet him, if with ladylike cordiality, then with as little show of feeling as she might have done one who had been, in very truth, a mere acquaintance of her youth!

And then Miss Rose, withdrawing her blue eyes quickly from his face, began pouring out tea, and, perhaps because the teapot was very heavy, her hand trembled a little.

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"Johnnie is no longer a little boy," said Colonel Stair in rather a hard voice.

"He seems very young to me," said Miss Rose mildly. "Sit down, my dear, here close to me," and Johnnie awkwardly obeyed her, thrusting out his long legs so that one of his feet crushed into his hostess's pretty grey-and-black lace gown.

But Miss Rose did not pull her skirt aside, though she must have been aware—or so Johnnie's father told himself—that a large dusty brown boot was rubbing against the delicate tracery.

Miss Rose was now giving her whole attention to providing her young guest with suitable food.

"You must be very hungry," Colonel Stair heard her say solicitously. "It's such a long drive from Ditch Haven! But though this is last year's blackberry jelly, it is really still quite good," and Johnnie beamed happily. Very few people took any notice of him when his father was by, and when they did they very seldom treated him, as this lady did, as a grown-up young man.

And then Colonel Stair, looking thoughtfully at Miss Rose, felt a pang of regret, of self-blame, that he had been so long in renewing the—well, the friendship between them. For Rose Charnwood, so he told himself with a curious, shamed surprise, had grown old very gracefully.

In the days when they had both been young, the feminine fashions of the time had been singularly ugly and unbecoming. True, young Rose Charnwood had been lovely, and beauty graces every fashion, but it was a Rose Charnwood grown old in the rather absurd habiliments of her youth that Colonel Stair had visioned.

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Very different was the reality. To take but one trifling matter—but one which he noted. Miss Rose's now grey hair, which in the days it had been auburn had been rather tightly fastened back from her white forehead and dressed in innumerable plaits wound round and round the back of her little head, was now allowed to fluff out under the charming lace cap, or rather coif, which framed the delicate oval of her face.

"Does your father still take three pieces of sugar in his tea?" she asked Johnnie anxiously, and poor Johnnie, stuttering a little, said, "I—I don't kn-kn-know."

"No sugar!" exclaimed Colonel Stair hastily. "My doctor has cut me off sugar."

Then, seeing, or thinking he saw, that his hostess looked disappointed, he altered his mind—"Perhaps to-day I need not be so strict. In fact, yes, Rose—I *will* have some sugar!"

"Not if it's bad for you, Alick," said Miss Rose pleadingly. "Pray—pray don't take it if it's bad for you!" And then, as he said nothing, she carefully picked out a large lump and a very little lump from the silver sugar-basket. "There!" she said with gentle triumph, "I don't think that *can* hurt you. That is only half what you always used to take!"

She turned to Johnnie: "It isn't often two such old friends as your father and I meet after so long a time." She waited a moment, and then, still addressing her younger guest, Miss Rose asked a little timidly, "Do you live far from here?"

"We live nowhere," said Johnnie mournfully.

His father noticed with satisfaction that Johnnie seemed

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more at ease than he generally did with a stranger, and that he answered Miss Rose's gentle questions quite intelligently. But sometimes, when Johnnie really felt at home, he was apt to talk too much; so Colonel Stair quickly interposed with a long, rather confused, account of how they once had taken a house in Norfolk, and how the experiment had proved a failure.

There had been great trouble about servants—very great trouble. But he understood that there were no good servants left now. All the people who lived in the hotels frequented by him and Johnnie told him that.

And Miss Rose was most sympathetic.

True, she herself, she and her sister—and when she spoke of her sister the colour deepened a little in her cheeks, but Colonel Stair was much too intent on his own feelings and sensations to notice such a trifling fact—had been extraordinarily fortunate in the matter of servants. In fact, she, Miss Rose, had never known a really bad servant, either in the old days, at the Rectory, or more lately at the Little House. But she was well aware that there are many such in the world—for almost every one she knew had had, or now unfortunately possessed, a servant to the perfection of whose character there was something lacking.

And then, again, she turned to the young man.

"To have no home," she said pityingly, "would seem dreadful to me; but then I'm very old-fashioned."

"It *is* dreadful!" said Johnnie in an explosive tone, and his voice to-day, or so his father thought, was less modulated than usual.

"It is dreadful!" repeated Johnnie in a lamentable tone, and Colonel Stair, with a feeling of acute discomfort, told

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himself that in another moment Johnnie might burst out crying.

Rather to his surprise he found himself exchanging a look of secret intelligence with Miss Rose.

"Not at all dreadful!" he said briskly. "Very pleasant indeed! We are able to go about and see something of the world. We couldn't do that if we were always in one place, could we, my boy?"

Miss Rose got up from her chair. "That's very true," she said, and again she threw Johnnie the bright, friendly little smile ladies only throw at grown-up young men—Johnnie felt very pleased, indeed he became radiant when she added,

"And now, Johnnie, I want to show you the garden! There are two prize guinea-pigs which really belong to the children at the Rectory, but one of them fell ill, so I offered to take it and nurse it back to health again."

She put her hand on the young man's arm and began guiding him about just as she might have done had he been indeed a child.

And he, on his side, began to talk to Miss Rose, and she responded, with apparent pleasure, to his stammering inchoate confidences.

Johnnie's mind and memory were like a jumble-box or a bran pie—one never knew what was coming out next. Just now he was naturally full of Ditch Haven, of the beach, the late bathing, the shells, and the shrimping; and his father, almost for the first time in their joint lives, felt no impulse to check him.

But still it was odd, even perhaps a little disconcerting for Colonel Stair to find Johnnie, rather than himself, the object of a lady's kind, interested solicitude.

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And then, at last, Miss Rose's guest awoke to the fact that it was growing late. It was a quarter to six. If they wished to go to Halkham House they must lose no time.

"Johnnie!" he called out. But Johnnie was happy talking—telling Miss Rose of some extraordinary find which he had made on the seashore.

His father strode forward and touched him.

"My boy, I'm afraid it's time to go. Perhaps Miss Charnwood will allow us to come again soon."

He gazed at her as he spoke, and, quite unknown to himself, it was a very pathetic, pleading glance he cast on her. Miss Rose's soft heart at once responded, but suddenly there came a look of trouble and unease on her face.

"Are you going to see Lady Susan to-day?" she asked in a low voice.

He looked at her earnestly, and for the first time that afternoon Alexander Stair forgot himself and his own concerns; in fact, he suddenly knew, as surely as if she had told him so, that Rose feared Lady Susan would say some mocking word, make some rough allusion to the old tragic happening which must now be forgotten, thrust far behind them, if they—he and Rose—were to be really friends.

"No, it's too late," he said deliberately, and with a tightening of the throat he saw the look of trouble, of shamed fear, disappear from her kind eyes. "And then when I do go and see her I think I'll ask you to allow me to leave my boy here. Is Lady Susan much the same as she used to be—Rose?"

It was the second time he had called her Rose, and both were aware of it.

"Yes, I don't think she's changed." Miss Rose spoke in a low, reluctant voice. "But you know I was never

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a favourite of hers, Alick. I don't often see her. She—she still rather frightens me." And then there came back over him the old feeling of dislike, even of something stronger, he had felt in old days for his kinswoman, Lady Susan Baliol.

"But she's very fond of our dear niece, of Mary Pechell," went on Miss Rose eagerly; "in fact, she's quite devoted to Mary! I should so like you to see Mary, Alick——" then Miss Rose stopped. It would be well-nigh impossible for Colonel Stair to see Mary Pechell without seeing Alice too.

He perceived that something had again troubled her, and this time it was something to which he had no clue.

"Must we go now, father?" said Johnnie disconsolately. "Can't we stay a little longer?"

"No, my boy. It will take us all our time to get back to Ditch Haven, and dress for dinner."

Colonel Stair held out his hand. He took Miss Rose's soft fingers in his hard, thin ones, and looked straight into her face.

"You'll let us come again soon?" he said, and then, a little huskily, "Thank you for all your goodness to my poor boy. You'll let me bring him again soon, Rose, won't you?"

And then to his surprise and chagrin there came a painful look of indecision over her face. For a moment that look brought back her vanished youth.

He dropped her hand hastily. "Forgive me!" he said quickly. "I—I know we ought not to have come——"

"No, no!" cried Miss Rose in an agony. "You don't understand, Alick! Of course I want Johnnie to come

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again. I—I think he's such a dear, nice boy. But, Alick—there's my sister——?"

"Your sister?"

"Yes, Alice and I live together."

The dreadful truth was out! Well, it would have had to have been told some time or other.

"Then Alice has not forgiven me," he said grimly. "Well, I don't wonder—I have never forgiven myself."

Poor Miss Rose! Her blue eyes dilated with pain and trouble. She thought she had found that hour—that hour in which she was to be happy all her life. But alas! It was flying—flying—

"*I* never blamed you," she whispered. "*I did understand:* you know that, Alick?"

"And d'you think I never blamed myself?" he said, in a gruff, broken voice. "I lived in hell for months—I might say for years! You know, Rose, surely you know how long it was before—before I mar——"

She stopped him with a gesture—a look at Johnnie. The young man's face had become lowering; he was always upset by any display, even by the atmosphere, of emotion.

The mind of Miss Rose took a sudden leap, formed a quick resolution.

"May *I* come over and see you one day soon?" she said. "I mean to Ditch Haven? I should so like to introduce my niece, Mary Pechell, to you, Alick. You remember her mother?"

"What day will you come?" he said briefly.

And then he took her hand and held it so tightly in his larger grasp that all the feeling went out of it. In a queer sort of way Miss Rose had the sensation that her hand no

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longer formed part of herself, that it had become merged in Alick Stair.

"I must settle that with Mary"—she made a feeble effort to withdraw her hand, but he held it in a vice.

"How about Wednesday afternoon?" he asked, still in that queer, gruff voice.

"Yes, Wednesday would be a very nice day," said Miss Rose flutteringly.

"Wednesday without fail. I count on you, Rose!" and then her hand was dropped with what seemed rather unnecessary suddenness. And a moment later they were gone.

Miss Rose crept back into the garden. It was getting rather chilly, but she made her way to the low chair on which she always sat.

And then, with tears running down her cheeks, Miss Rose lived again every moment of this wonderful visit, and projected her mind into the immediate future. He counted on her, so much was clear, to help him a little with Johnnie. Well, she would not fail him.

She would speak to Alice on Tuesday—Tuesday was her birthday, and Alice would not be unkind to her on her birthday.

Rose's soft heart yearned over the boy. Had it not been for Johnnie, the pain, the—the awkwardness of this meeting would have been almost intolerable; she felt grateful to Johnnie for having enabled her to get through it all right. Colonel Stair was at once so like and so unlike the Alick whose image she still cherished in every fibre of her being.

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It was good of him not to have gone to see Lady Susan to-day! The thought that they were going on to Halkham House had dwelt with her, an ugly spectre, in the background of her mind, during the whole of the time he and Johnnie had been with her.

Rose had never forgotten, she had never even forgiven, much as she had forgiven in her life, an interview forced on her, more than thirty years ago, by Lady Susan.

Lady Susan had chosen an unfortunate method of consolation—that of belittling Alick Stair: "He's really a very ordinary young man," she had said. "Not worth wasting your life and health over. You are making not only yourself unhappy, but every one round you wretched!" and much more to the same purpose.

And Rose, the Rose of thirty odd years ago, had been compelled to listen with downcast eyes: she had not been able to run away and hide herself as she sorely longed to do.

For a long hour Lady Susan had had her at her mercy—kind and severe by turns. But though Rose had not been aware of it at the time—and was even now not aware of it—Lady Susan's words had acted as a tonic, and it was perhaps thanks to them that she had at last made a great effort over herself, and recovered serenity.

But neither she nor Alice ever went to Halkham House. When they and Lady Susan met, it was on neutral ground; and to the two sisters the old woman's affection for Mary Pechell had been a disagreeable surprise, which, with Miss Alice, deepened into disapproval as they discovered that their cherished niece was on her side very fond of Lady Susan.

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CHAPTER XVIII

Mary Pechell woke up with a start. It was close on eight o'clock. Late indeed for her to be still asleep. And this was the nineteenth of October, dear little Aunt Rose's birthday! Mary sat up; she felt tired, unwontedly so. She had yet to learn that emotion drains vitality.

She had long remained awake the night before, too excited, too happy to sleep. It was the first time in her twenty-five years of life that she had ever felt a keen sense of exultant personal happiness. She had been so young when she had taken to the work which had absorbed the whole of her mind, heart, and energy.

And now, for the moment, her work had become nothing to her, and yet—and yet she had been so absolutely sincere when she had uttered her rather priggish words to John Ryman!

Not for the first time when thinking of Ryman, there came over Mary Pechell a feeling of extreme unease and discomfort; it would not be pleasant having to tell him that she had changed her mind, and in so very short a time.

She moved uneasily as the young man's image rose before her. Now that she had become one of the great company of lovers, she understood so much that had been hidden from her before, and that with all her intimate sympathy with the unhappy and the unfortunate. The thought that John Ryman could feel for her even a little of what she now felt herself for Richard Caryll filled her with pain

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as well as with distress. During the last few days she had wondered whether or no it was her duty to sit down and write him a letter telling him of her engagement.

It would be impossible, and even rather absurd, to keep the fact secret for any length of time; still, it was a comfort to feel that for the present no one need know.

It hurt her, too, to think that Lady Susan, in spite of her liking for Caryll, would be disappointed, probably made not a little angry by the news. Poor Mary sighed. It was strange that what made her so happy should make others sad. . . .

Through the open window she could hear her Aunt Rose in the garden. It would be well to get up and go out quickly with her gift—the sad pearl pins which she had chosen with Richard Caryll, and which he had said would be a joint gift from them both. She would prefer to present the little shagreen case to Aunt Rose before Aunt Alice came down.

Mary wondered what Aunt Alice's present would be. Fortunately there was no fear of their gifts clashing. Miss Alice was a generous giver, but she liked her presents to be useful; she would certainly not give Rose anything in the least like these two charming old jewelled pins. . . .

Twenty minutes later Mary was in the garden.

"A happy birthday, darling Aunt Rose!" she took the plump little figure in her strong young arms and kissed Miss Rose warmly, tenderly. "A happy birthday!" she repeated, and then, for Miss Rose was still clinging to her, she disengaged herself. "Look, dear Aunt Rose, I've brought you a little present," and she opened the narrow green case. "They're a pair of pins. We—I mean I—

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thought they would just do to fasten on the cap I gave you this summer."

"Oh my dear!" said Aunt Rose. "How beautiful! I shall feel quite afraid of wearing anything so pretty! But I fear, dear child, that this present must have cost you a great deal of money?"

"No, indeed it didn't!" said Mary rather quickly. "These pins were a great bargain. And—and, Aunt Rose——" she could not finish her sentence—she could not say anything yet as to Richard Caryll's share in the present.

But Miss Rose was evidently not listening. With a feeling of anxious misgiving Mary told herself that her dear little aunt looked really ill—ill and wan in the morning sunlight. Had she not been so absorbed in herself and her own concerns Mary would have seen it before; in fact she *had* seen it, last evening.

Was it possible that Miss Rose was ailing, really ailing? There was a troubled, far-away look on her dear, sweet old face. She was staring down at the shagreen case with an anxious, preoccupied look.

"They are lovely pins," she repeated mechanically. "But, Mary?"

"Yes, dear Aunt Rose."

"I want to ask you to do something with me. I wonder if you could spare the time to-morrow afternoon to go to Ditch Haven—just you and I together, my dear? I have an old friend staying there, some one I should like you to meet."

"Of course I shall be delighted to go with you, Aunt Rose——" but Mary Pechell was very much surprised,

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more so than the request warranted. It was the first time within her recollection that Miss Rose had ever proposed taking her anywhere.

"I suppose Aunt Alice will come too?" she said hesitatingly. She felt as if she was answering an unspoken, anxious question in the other's face.

"No, my dear. No, I do not think that your Aunt Alice will accompany us. Of course I shall tell her that we are going to Ditch Haven, but she does not like the place." And then, after a few moments, Miss Rose added: "And there are other reasons, dear Mary, why Alice would not care to come with us to-morrow."

"Well, we shall have a very happy little expedition," said Mary smiling. "Do you know—it's rather a shameful confession—I haven't been to Ditch Haven since I was a child!"

Miss Rose put her arm through her niece's, and together they went indoors.

Even Miss Alice felt the happy influence of her sister's birthday. She rather hurried over prayers; and then when the three ladies walked through into the dining-room she laughed at the number of parcels heaped up in and round Rose's plate.

There were pretty gifts from the far away North of England cousin and her children; curious rather than attractive pieces of fancy-work from the little girls at the Rectory; odd old-fashioned birthday cards from certain of the aged people in the village, who remembered the date of Miss Rose's birthday as well as they did their own.

As for Miss Alice's gift, it had taken, as always, a thoroughly sensible and practical form; it consisted of a very

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handsome quilt, salmon silk on the one side and bright blue satin on the other.

But Mary Pechell, watching Miss Rose, did not feel satisfied. More and more it seemed to her that her aunt was very unlike herself. There had been a strange look of excitement, of anxiety on Miss Rose's face as she had undone one or two of the smaller parcels which had come by post. It was almost as though she was expecting a gift which had not arrived. And yet she seemed pleased with everything, touchingly grateful, as was her way, to find she had been remembered by so many kind people.

"I can't understand why any one should mind being reminded of their birthday!" she said happily. "I can look back to so many happy birthdays!"

"Most women, and all men, hate to be reminded that they are growing older!" exclaimed Miss Alice briskly. "Even Joe's wife"—she never, if she could help it, gave the clergyman's wife what had been her mother's name—"even Joe's wife was quite annoyed when I told some one the other day that she was thirty-six. And yet she looks it, every day of it. But when I told her that, it only seemed to annoy her the more."

Just as Miss Alice had poured herself out a second cup of tea, there came to the front door of the Little House the peculiar knock and ring which all three ladies knew to mean a telegram.

"Some one's wiring you their congratulations," said Mary, smiling at Miss Rose.

"I don't think we know any one who'd be so foolish as to do that!" cried Miss Alice. In their quiet household a telegram was an exceptional event; in fact the only

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person who ever telegraphed to the Little House was Mary Pechell herself.

They waited in silence. But the moments went slowly by; no buff-coloured envelope was brought into the room, but soon came the patter of an interchange of quick, laughing words going on at the front door. That in itself was of course quite wrong; the boy ought to have gone to the back door.

Miss Alice got up, a frown on her face. "Jane!" she cried out sharply, "Who's there? Is that a telegram?"

"No, ma'am. It's a parcel, ma'am. I'm only telling the young fellow how to get back to the station; he's a stranger here. It's a post-office messenger, ma'am, with a parcel."

"A post-office messenger?" repeated Miss Alice in astonishment. She had never heard of a post-office messenger.

Leaving the dining-room door open behind her, she went out into the hall. Yes, there was a young man, with "Post Office" written across his smart cap, and Jane was signing a little piece of paper. On the hall table lay a large, mysterious-looking wooden box.

"It's from Ditch Haven, ma'am," said Jane.

"There must be some mistake," said Miss Alice firmly. "I do not suppose for a moment that this box is meant for us."

"Oh, yes, ma'am, it is indeed," said Jane; and there came a demure giggle in her young voice. "It's for Miss Rose, ma'am. Flowers, I should think."

Miss Alice quelled her with a look, but, yes—Jane, strange to say, had evidently guessed right, for across the

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wooden box was stamped in bold black letters, "The Camellia and Carnation Nurseries, Ditch Haven."

Miss Alice's face softened; a very pleasant smile lit up her severe face. This must be one of Richard Caryll's odd, kind, generous actions, of course! The last time he had been at the Little House he had talked of those famous nurseries—the Ditch Haven nurseries, which were said to supply not only London and Edinburgh, but even Paris, with the choicest camellias and carnations.

There is something pleasant, even to the most frugal mind, in a millionaire's generous extravagances. Miss Alice told herself that it was very nice of Mr. Caryll to give Rose this birthday gift of flowers. It was curious, of course, that he should have learnt the fact that her birthday fell on the nineteenth of October—and yet not so very curious after all. Any one of the Rectory children—with whom, by the way, he had made great friends—might have told him. Doubtless little Rosie had done so, for the child must have worked hard and pricked her fingers badly in making the elaborate kettle-holder which had been her birthday gift to her godmother and namesake.

Taking the large wooden case up into her arms, Miss Alice brought it to the dining-room.

"Flowers!" she exclaimed. "For you, Rose, from Mr. Caryll. It seems rather an absurd way to have sent them —all the way by hand from Ditch Haven, by a post-office messenger; but I suppose he thought they would not have been so fresh had they been posted last night."

But Miss Rose remained silent.

"Dear me," went on her sister eagerly, "this is really a very clever contrivance! You see that sort of little wooden bolt, Mary? Well, they have printed alongside of

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it, 'Unscrew this. No screw-driver required.' May I open the box, Rose?" And Miss Rose murmured, "Yes, do, dear sister!"

With a certain eagerness Miss Alice pulled out the long wooden pin, and then she lifted back on its hinges the cover of the box.

Lying on the folds of snow-white wadding was an envelope inscribed "Miss Rosamund Charnwood."

"Rosamund?" exclaimed Miss Alice, taking up the envelope and inspecting it closely. "How very funny! Well, that proves who must have told Mr. Caryll the date of your birthday, Rose. It must have been one of the old village people. I think Mrs. Tuke still calls you 'Miss Rosamund,' doesn't she, my dear?"

Rose nodded, and held out her hand. "Will you give me the—the letter, Alice?"

"It isn't a letter. It's a visiting-card. I can feel it"; she handed the envelope to her sister. Then with quick, deft fingers she took off the wadding. "Oh, Rose!" she cried. "Oh, Mary! Do look! They really are most beautiful! Absolutely perfect blooms!" and the gardener's enthusiasm in Miss Alice was roused. "White, pink, and red camellias in the middle and round the sides carnations of all colours. It almost seems a pity to disturb them."

And then, very quietly, Miss Rose got up from her chair and walked out of the room.

"D'you think Aunt Rose is quite well?" said Mary a little anxiously.

"Well, I don't know that I should describe her as being quite well," answered Miss Alice absently, her whole mind centred on the flowers. "She has looked rather tired lately, and I'm arranging for her to have a change. But

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you mustn't be surprised at her going away just now. Your aunt's feelings are very easily touched, and she's always rather upset on her birthday. I always pretend not to notice anything of that sort," and, even as she spoke, Miss Alice was spreading a newspaper on to a side table, and transferring thereon the wooden case full of flowers.

"They really are lovely!" she repeated. "I can't help liking Mr. Caryll very much indeed, Mary. There are some people here who don't care for him. They think him mysterious and stand off. But he's been remarkably kind and nice to *us*. I must see that Rose sends him a note. But I wonder—dear me, how very strange," she said suddenly. "I thought Mr. Caryll was in London! He must have remembered Rose's birthday and wired to the Ditch Haven nurseries. I suppose a man of that sort sends flowers to a great many ladies. He probably has an account there."

"Mr. Caryll has come back," said Mary in a low voice. "He was in London yesterday. We came down in the same train last evening, Aunt Alice. He prefers going on to Cleeping Junction. He doesn't like Dilchester."

"How odd of him," said Miss Alice, "but then he is rather odd, isn't he? I think, Mary, that we shall have to get that large Chinese basin from the hall—nothing else will hold these camellias." She looked deprecatingly at the splendid blossoms. "It seems rather—rather extravagant, doesn't it, Mary, that any one should be able to afford this kind of flowers, and pay for the growing of them?"

"I have always hated all that sort of thing," said Mary in a low voice.

Alice looked up. "Yes, so have I," she said soberly.

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"People say it's good for trade, but that's a lie," went on Mary in a low, vehement voice. "It doesn't do any good to the real workers!"

"Oh, come, my dear. How about the men employed at the nurseries?"

"They'd be paid just as well for growing spinach!"

"And yet—and yet I suppose it is a good thing that people like this Mr. Richard Caryll should make a lot of money? He certainly spends it with great kindness, and on the whole with great wisdom. But I hope he won't send *me* flowers if he ever learns that the fourth of May is *my* birthday," said Alice Charnwood with great decision.

And Mary suddenly laughed—a happy girlish laugh. "Oh, no," she said. "I'll see that he doesn't do that!"

"I beg that you will do nothing of the sort," said her aunt quickly. "I wouldn't for the world that he should think we didn't like his present. I do hope he'll come in and see us before these lovely flowers have had time to fade. Rose had better ask him in to tea, to-morrow."

"Not to-morrow," said Mary hesitatingly. "Not to-morrow, Aunt Alice," and then as Miss Charnwood said quickly, "And why not, pray?" she stopped short and became very red. Somehow she did not like to speak of the coming expedition to Ditch Haven before Miss Rose had told her sister.

Ditch Haven—? A flood of light broke in on Mary. Why, these flowers were not from Richard Caryll! If he had meant to send flowers to Miss Rose he would have said so yesterday. These flowers must be from Aunt Rose's friend—the friend who was now at Ditch Haven, and whom they, she and Mary, were going to see to-morrow.

"Oh, well, if not to-morrow, then the day after to-

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morrow," observed Miss Alice good-humouredly. "They will still be quite fresh by then. Perhaps I'd better just go up to Rose now. She ought to write her note of thanks to Mr. Caryll at once, and then one of the maids can take it up to the Castle Farm."

She did not hear Mary's half involuntary word of protest, but as she was going up the staircase there came the sound of her sister's soft voice thanking cook for the very pretty pot-plant which cook had brought as a gift to Miss Rose from cook's mother, a laundress who lived in a village some three miles from Halkham.

Miss Charnwood turned and came down into the hall again.

"Rose!" she called out a little impatiently. "Rose, my dear, will you come into the drawing-room for a minute?" and then she went on to the drawing-room to wait there for her sister.

The little rosewood escritoire which was, in a peculiar sense, Miss Rose's own property and writing-table, lay open, and on it Miss Alice suddenly saw the envelope which had come with the flowers; while the card which had evidently been in the envelope was lying on the flap of the open desk, face downwards.

With no thought of prying into her sister's concerns—neither ever had any secret from the other—Miss Alice took up the card, curious to see what Mr. Caryll had written—what kind of birthday message he had composed. Mr. Caryll had rather a pretty style in letters. . . .

"To dear Miss Rosamund Charnwood. Many happy returns of her birthday. With love from Johnnie."

Johnnie? Then the flowers were not from Richard

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Caryll, after all! How very strange, and how very disconcerting! Miss Alice felt foolish, and it was a particularly disagreeable and mortifying sensation.

Johnnie? Who could Johnnie be? She turned the white card over and over in her hand, trying to remember the names of some of the young people with whom her sister, generally against her wish and approval, had made friends among the summer visitors who engaged all the available lodgings in Halkham—luckily there were very few—often six months in advance.

There were certain summer visitors who, after having spent a few weeks in the beautiful village, went on to Ditch Haven. Miss Charnwood judged them severely. They were rich, idle, frivolous people, who didn't know how to spend their time in the country, and who naturally preferred the meretricious attractions of a little seaside town to village life!

"Johnnie," or rather Johnnie's parents, must be among these, so argued Miss Charnwood, holding the white card 'twixt scornful finger and thumb. This was a child's handwriting, though no child could have thought of sending Miss Rose so absurd and extravagant a gift as were those flowers.

Miss Alice told herself that she might have had the sense to know that Mr. Caryll would never have done so foolish a thing.

With the card still in her hand she went out of the drawing-room. "Rose!" she called out sharply. "Come here, Rose."

But there came no answering "Yes, Alice, I'm coming, sister." Instead, cook's heavy steps were heard. "I think

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Miss Rose has gone up to her room, ma'am. Miss Rose don't look very well to-day; perhaps she has the headache."

Alice, filled with a slight foreboding, went upstairs. She knocked at her sister's door, and turned the handle. But the door was locked. This was the first time that Rose, as far as Alice knew, had ever locked her bedroom door.

"Rose!" she called out urgently. "Rose, what's the matter, my dear? Don't you feel well?"

"I'm going to lie down for a while," so came the muffled answer. "I don't feel very well—I had a bad night, dear Alice. But don't worry about me. I shall be all right soon."

Miss Charnwood went down again into the dining-room.

"Mary," she said abruptly, "you're right about your aunt! Rose isn't well. I wonder if we ought to send for the doctor?" And then, "Look here, child, isn't this extraordinary? You know those flowers"—she looked disapprovingly at the beautiful blossoms—"I've discovered that they're not from Mr. Caryll at all! They're from some one who is, I suppose, staying at Ditch Haven, obviously one of your Aunt Rose's summer friends." She held out the card. "This came with them."

Mary gazed at the childish message, and smiled broadly.

Miss Alice at last smiled, too. "Don't you remember that there was a child ill at Mrs. Smithers's last summer? I think this must be from that child."

"Oh no," said Mary positively, "that was a little girl—I'm sure of that."

"Well, at any rate, Johnnie's parents must be very foolish people, and have much more money than they know what to do with!" said Miss Alice dryly.

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CHAPTER XIX

The morning wore itself away. Twice Miss Charnwood went up to her sister's door. "Rose," she called out softly. "Rose, my dear, are you asleep?" And always the answer came back, "No, I'm not asleep, dear Alice, and I feel better, thank you. I'm lying down—don't worry about me."

And then at twelve came the second post, bringing more little parcels and letters for Miss Rose.

Among the latter was a letter addressed "Miss Rosamund Charnwood," and at the back, across the flap of the envelope, was printed in bold blue letters "The Ditch Haven Hotel."

"This must be from 'Johnnie's' mother," said Miss Alice to Mary. "Perhaps, my dear, you would run up and give your aunt her letters? I think the parcels can wait till she comes down to lunch. And, Mary, do tell her that it will do quite well if she writes a line of thanks to 'Johnnie' to-morrow—I mean she needn't worry to do it to-day if she doesn't feel well."

And Mary nodded. She ran upstairs and knocked at Miss Rose's door.

"Aunt Rose!" she called out. "Here are your letters. There are also quite a lot of parcels. Would you like me to bring them up to you?"

"Are you alone?" asked Miss Rose in a whisper. Her voice sounded startlingly clear. She was evidently standing close to the door.

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"Yes, dear Aunt Rose. I've brought you up your letters."

Then the door was slowly unlocked, and Mary walked in.

Poor Aunt Rose! Darling Aunt Rose! Her eyes were red, her cheeks pale—she had been crying. And, as they both knew, Miss Alice hated the sight of tears.

"Is Alice coming up?" asked Miss Rose apprehensively.

"Oh, no—in fact, Aunt Alice must be gone out by now. She only waited for the post." After a moment, feeling rather like a conspirator, Mary added coaxingly, "Do look at your letters. There's one from Ditch Haven!"

And then there came over Mary Pechell a feeling of quick distress and of surprise. Miss Rose swayed forward; she looked as though she were about to faint.

"Aunt Rose!" Mary exclaimed. "Do let me call some one. I'm sure you ought to have the doctor."

"No, my dear, I'm not ill. I'm only"—Miss Rose smiled, or rather tried to smile—"I'm only a little agitated, Mary. I think you'd better leave me by myself. I shall be all right soon."

"I shouldn't think of leaving you," said Mary firmly.

Poor little Aunt Rose! The mingled emotions of her birthday morning had evidently thoroughly upset her. If absurd, her emotion was also touching.

Mary Pechell bent down and kissed Miss Rose. "Won't you sit down, dear?"

But Miss Rose did not sit down. Instead, she took hold of her niece's arm, and gazed piteously up in her face.

"Mary," she said a little breathlessly, "I want you to promise me that you will say nothing to Alice."

"Of course I'll say nothing to Aunt Alice." Mary

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Pechell felt unhappy and uncomfortable. She had begun to suspect that this was no ordinary emotion induced by excitement and pleasure.

"I'm afraid of Alice," said Miss Rose in a low voice. "You don't know how frightened I am of Alice, Mary! I know she means to be kind to me, but—but she's so stern. Something has happened that I'm afraid Alice will find out. And the dreadful thing is that she will have to know it. Some day soon I shall have to tell her, Mary."

"Let me tell her," said Mary persuasively. "I'm not a bit afraid of Aunt Alice! I never have been afraid of her. But don't think of that now, dear Aunt Rose! Do open your letters. Lie down, and I'll read them to you."

"I don't want to lie down," said Miss Rose fretfully.

"Then sit down," said Mary soothingly. "Sit down here, Aunt Rose, and I'll kneel close to you on the floor and read you your letters. I'm sure they're all nice ones, coming on your birthday."

And Miss Rose did sit down.

"Let us begin with the one from Ditch Haven," said Mary persuasively. "I suppose it's from the friend you wish us to go to see to-morrow?"

"Yes," said Miss Rose in a low voice, "it is from that friend—a very old friend of mine, Mary."

"Would you like to read it yourself?" said Mary.

Miss Rose hesitated. "No," she said. "I think I should like you to read it to me, dear child." And then very quietly she added to her niece the amazing words, "It is from the gentleman to whom I was once engaged, Mary. He came to tea with me yesterday. It is his son who sent me those beautiful flowers to-day."

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"*Alick Stair?*" said Mary, staring up in Miss Rose's face. "*Mr. Stair*, Aunt Rose?"

"Not Mr. Stair, my dear—Colonel Stair. And now will you please read me his letter?"

And Mary Pechell, in a slow, hesitating voice, read aloud Colonel Stair's long letter:

MY DEAR ROSE,—

Before seeing you to-morrow I feel I ought to tell you frankly that I desire to renew our acquaintanceship with a view to marriage.

To refer to the past is personally very painful to myself, but I can assure you that much as I was at fault in allowing myself to love you, my subsequent action—that for which I believe I was severely blamed—was justified. I suffered greatly: far more, I feel sure, than you did yourself. But even so, I now come and crave your pardon. I know you to be too generous to allow the past to influence, adversely, the present.

You have seen my poor boy. The task I ask you to share with me is no easy one. I have been looking at your marriage service, and I come to propose that we enjoy, in as far as is possible at our age, the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought long ago to have had of the other.

My worldly circumstances have changed greatly for the better, and though the bulk of my income passes at my death to Johnnie, you, as my widow, would be in the enjoyment of some six hundred to seven hundred a year. In fact, I could make such a settlement at once.

I need hardly tell you that Johnnie will never marry. Were such a question to arise, I should unhesitatingly apply to the Commissioners in Lunacy.

And now, Rose, I have said all I have to say. I do not wish to hurry your decision, but if you come to-morrow I shall believe that you are not wholly adverse to the idea.

You will, I hope, receive in the morning a birthday greeting from Johnnie. We have just been to see them cut at the Nurseries. Should

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you find it in your heart to send me a kind word I shall be deeply grateful. As I grow old, suspense is hard to bear.

Yours very truly,
ALEXANDER STAIR.

P. S.—I will abase myself before Alice when and where you please. She once looked upon me as a brother. It should be possible for her to do so again.

When Mary Pechell had read the last words of Colonel Stair's letter, she threw it with a violent gesture on the floor, and hiding her face in Miss Rose's lap, burst into tears.

"Mary? My darling child!" Miss Rose with trembling fingers smoothed the bright coils of fair hair, and any one looking at the two—the sitting woman and the kneeling girl—would have thought Mary in an abandonment of grief, Miss Rose calm and kind, trying to console her.

"You mustn't cry," whispered Miss Rose.

But Mary went on sobbing. "Forgive me, Aunt Rose," she gasped. "I'm ashamed of myself! It's—it's very silly of me to behave like this!"

It was the contrast between her own happy fate and that of her aunt which was moving the depths of her nature. She shrank from the stiff sheet of paper as if it had been a living thing. It seemed to her that she had never read so hard, so cruel a letter, one so filled with the deadness, the selfishness of ageing life. And it was for the writer of this letter that Aunt Rose had wasted all her radiant youth in vain regrets.

But what was this Miss Rose was saying?

"You're not silly, dear Mary—you're kind. Of course,

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if I'd known what was in his letter I shouldn't have asked you to read it. I thought he was simply writing to me about to-morrow."

But then her scrupulous sense of truth asserted itself. "I knew he would write this letter some day," she murmured. "I knew it when we were saying good-bye to one another yesterday afternoon. It was something in his manner—the way he held my hand. That was why I did not sleep last night. I did so wonder if he would remember my birthday. We spent my nineteenth birthday together, Mary, up at Highways. Just before the end." She waited a minute. "It was very kind of him to think of the flowers."

"Oh, but I expect Johnnie thought of the flowers," said Mary, smiling through her tears, and as she smiled she shuddered too—Johnnie Stair was *mad*—otherwise why that reference to the Lunacy Commissioners? How horrible!

"No, my dear, I don't think Johnnie thought of the flowers—I think his father thought of them," said Miss Rose, and there came such a glow, such a look of happy contentment on her face that again Mary began to cry.

Poor Aunt Rose! Poor dear Aunt Rose!

A fierce wish to protect Miss Rose swept over her. She told herself that there was only one phrase in Colonel Stair's letter which she liked, which she could tolerate. It was that in which he spoke of abasing himself before Miss Alice.

"It is a beautiful letter," said Miss Rose musingly. She stooped to one side and taking up the stiff sheet of notepaper held it to her soft breast.

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"Of course, he does not know that we were left that money. It was very kind of him, Mary, to put in that about the six hundred a year. Perhaps he thought it would reconcile Alice to the idea"—she looked anxiously, piteously down into the flushed, glowing young face turned up to hers.

"But, Aunt Rose—surely, Aunt Rose, you don't——"

Then Mary stopped, for Miss Rose was again speaking: "It is dreadful that Alice should still feel as she does, Mary," and it was the only word of blame of her sister that Mary had ever heard Miss Rose utter.

"The last time we spoke of the matter—it was some years ago—Alice was most unkind! Of course it was all for me—it was only because she felt for my—my disappointment."

Mary made a restless movement of protest.

"But, as you will understand, Mary, if ever you come to love any one very much, it hurt me terribly to hear him blamed."

"Do you find him very much changed?" asked Mary in a low voice.

"At first," said Miss Rose simply, "I should not have known him. But of course when he spoke it was different. And then at the end, at the very end, Mary, just before he went away, it seemed to me that it was the old Alick standing there! He always had a rather imperious, masterful manner"—she tried to smile. "I suppose that is one reason why I fell in love with him. You see, I was so very different."

Mary nodded, and Miss Rose went on: "Well, last night, when he was going away and we were speaking of my going to Ditch Haven, I had to tell him that I was

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afraid Alice would not like it, and his manner became—well, just as it used to be, my dear."

"Then I suppose we are still going to Ditch Haven to-morrow?"

Something in the constrained tone of the girl's voice distressed Miss Rose.

"Mary!" she said imploringly. "Do you consider that it would be forward of me to do so? I mean after what Alick has put in his letter?"

"Good God, no!" said Mary fiercely, and Miss Rose shrank back a little. Mary's emphatic words sounded, just a little, like a swear! "I only wondered, Aunt Rose, if you are quite *sure* you wish to go?" She spoke very earnestly, even solemnly now.

"No," said Miss Rose, and her cheeks turned a bright pink. "I do not wish to go to that hotel, Mary. It seems to me an—an unladylike thing to do, under the circumstances. Don't you think so yourself, my love? And yet," she turned the letter she held in her hand and pointed silently to the words, "As I grow old, suspense is hard to bear."

"It won't hurt Colonel Stair to bear a little suspense now," said Mary sharply.

"It would hurt me to inflict it upon him," said Miss Rose in a low voice.

Mary again hid her face in Miss Rose's lap, but she was not crying, she was thinking. At last she looked up.

"Aunt Rose," she said eagerly. "I know exactly what we ought to do. You are quite right, it would not be suitable for us to go to Ditch Haven to-morrow. It is Colonel Stair's place to come to you—not yours to go to him."

"I feel that too," said Miss Rose wistfully.

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"Therefore," went on Mary thoughtfully, "by far the best thing will be for me to send him a telegram."

Miss Rose clasped her hands.

"You to send him a telegram!" she echoed doubtfully.

Mary had got up and was standing over her, wise in her young wisdom. "Yes, Aunt Rose, that's the only thing to do."

"You mustn't say I'm ill!" said Miss Rose quickly, and Mary wondered at Aunt Rose's new gift for reading minds.

"The only time Alick was ever really angry with me was when I got a summer chill, and Alice said I was too ill to go out for a walk with him! You mustn't say I'm ill, Mary."

"Very well," said Mary. "I won't say you're ill, Aunt Rose. It hardly matters what I say—I'm sure he will understand. I'll run down and do it now. There are some forms on Aunt Alice's writing-table. Then I'll come up and show it you, and then I'll go and send it off myself at the Post Office!"

Ten minutes later she was back in the room. Mary had not found it very easy to compose that telegram.

"What a long telegram!" said Miss Rose nervously.

"Quite short compared to what many people send nowadays," said Mary promptly.

Aunt Rose thanks you for the beautiful flowers. She hopes you and your son will come to tea to-morrow.—MARY PECHELL.

"If you do not think that it would make the telegram too long, I should like to add, dear Mary, the words, 'Aunt Rose sends her love to Johnnie.'"

"Has Johnnie a keeper?" asked Mary slowly.

"A keeper? My dear Mary!" Miss Rose spoke with

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a touch of gentle severity. "Johnnie is a very nice, affectionate boy. He is only a little, a *very* little peculiar, my dear."

"Oh, I see. I beg your pardon, Aunt Rose. Well, I will go and send it off now, before Aunt Alice comes in."

Miss Rose took her niece's hand in hers. "You have been very good to me, dear child, and I thank you."

"Dear Aunt Rose—darling Aunt Rose!" Mary Pechell clung to the speaker for a moment, and then she saw that a change, a look of depression and fear, had come over Miss Rose.

"What is it?" she said quickly. "Have you changed your mind? Would you rather take more time for thought, Aunt Rose?"

"I am thinking of Alice," said Miss Rose. "I shall have to speak to Alice this evening if—if they are coming to-morrow. Would you mind being there when I do tell her?"

"I think that would hurt Aunt Alice very much," said Mary reluctantly.

"Then I will tell her alone," said Miss Rose quietly. "I know it is foolish of me to be frightened."

"Perhaps she won't be as angry as you fear she will be," suggested Mary consolingly. "Aunt Alice loves you very much, and if you hadn't always given in to her she wouldn't be so—well, so determined to have her own way. I hope, Aunt Rose, that you won't always give in to Colonel Stair?"

"It will be my duty to study his wishes," said Miss Rose gently.

"Yes—but not to become his slave!" cried Mary quickly. And then she was sorry she had said those words. "Aunt

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Rose?"—she looked down gravely into her aunt's face—"I want to give you one piece of advice, and I do hope you won't think it impertinent of me to do so. But—but if you really mean to marry Colonel Stair, tell Aunt Alice to-night that it's settled—that you're engaged."

"Engaged?" faltered Miss Rose. "But would that be true, Mary? Surely I am not yet—engaged?"

Mary waved the bit of paper in her hand. "This telegram is your engagement ring! After this telegram it would be most dishonourable of you, Aunt Rose, to draw back." She laughed, and then her face became very grave. How could she have said that?

But Miss Rose had forgotten the past. Childlike, she was absorbed in the present. "I thank you for your advice, dear child," she said a little solemnly. "I know it is good; if I can, I will take it."

And long after the girl had gone, long after Miss Rose had heard the front door shut behind Mary, she visioned the figure of her niece waving the paper with the words, "This telegram is your engagement ring!"

Miss Rose went over to the old knee-table which had been turned into a dressing-table, and in the drawers of which she kept many little treasures.

In the lowest right-hand drawer were the mementoes of her brief engagement. As she unlocked the drawer she felt glad—very glad—that she had not given in to Alice's stern command and sent back Alick's letters—the now yellowed letters were all there, quite a small packet after all, and in such small thin envelopes, each with its dark red Victorian stamp.

To the last letter—the dreadful last letter her lover had written her—he had added a postscript; he had always

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been fond of postscripts: "You will oblige me by keeping the ring I gave you." And the young, heart-broken Rose had so "obliged" him. She had drawn the ring off the finger on which he had placed it so proudly three months before; she had carefully placed it in the tiny brown leather case; and—and she had never opened the case again.

Miss Rose now took out of the drawer the little leather case. She pressed the stiff, old-fashioned spring and looked down at the ring which she had thought never to look at more, which she had hoped would be slipped by kind, reverent hands on her dead finger.

It was a poor, shabby little ring, according to modern notions; only a thin circlet of bright gold set with a small diamond and two turquoises—turquoise was supposed to be her colour, for she had been very fair.

And as she looked at it, for the first time since Mary had read her Colonel Stair's letter, tears came into Miss Rose's blue eyes. "It's a girl's ring," she murmured to herself aloud. "I'll never wear it again after to-day! But to-day I will wear it."

But alas! the little ring would no longer go on the right finger, and so Miss Rose slipped it on to her little finger. She felt as if it would act as a talisman, giving her courage and strength during her difficult talk with Alice.

Mary had been right—quite right. It would not be kind, it would not be a fair return for her sister's lifelong love and care, to tell Alice her news in the presence of another, however loving and sympathetic that other might be. No, she must face her ordeal—and to Miss Rose it was a very terrible ordeal—alone.

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CHAPTER XX

And now came the end of what had been to all three ladies sitting in the drawing-room of the Little House a very long day.

Miss Rose had come down to lunch, and Miss Charnwood had been glad to see that her sister had recovered herself.

True, Rose had eaten very little, but then she never did eat much when she was excited, so Alice thought nothing of that.

And at last after their simple dinner was over, and when they had gone into the drawing-room, Mary Pechell, to her elder aunt's surprise, suddenly got up and said that she was going over to Halkham House.

"I am sure Aunt Rose will forgive me," she said. "I promised Lady Susan I would go in, if not in the afternoon, then this evening."

She did not wait for the word of remonstrance which was sure to be uttered.

But Miss Alice was determined to have her say, and when her niece came down, dressed in a long cloak, and only wearing a hood, "You can't go through the village alone at this time of night," she said sharply. "One of the maids can go with you, and stay to bring you back."

"No, Aunt Alice, I am going quite alone," said Mary firmly. "I always go about by myself alone in London, and I'm certainly not going to take out one of your young maids to-night—it is absurd I should do so." She spoke

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with the touch of quiet decision Miss Charnwood had reluctantly learnt to respect.

"I think you might have waited till to-morrow," said the elder lady reproachfully, "and not have gone out to see Lady Susan on your aunt's birthday."

"I'm sorry, but you see I promised; and I asked Aunt Rose if she would mind."

"Is John Ryman staying there just now?"

"No, Aunt Alice. Lady Susan is quite alone. I shouldn't have gone if John Ryman were there, or—or—any other visitor," said her niece a little stiffly.

Miss Alice went back to the drawing-room and sat down. She felt rather ruffled. "Mary has a very determined character," she said thoughtfully. "I suppose our poor sister and Major Pechell spoilt her. And then you have always spoilt her too, Rose."

Miss Rose made no answer. She had drawn up close to the fire. They always began fires on the evening of her birthday; it had been an old custom at the Rectory, and it was one which was honoured at the Little House.

Miss Alice also drew up close to the fire and prepared for a cosy talk. She took a very keen interest in all that went on in the village, and she was always sure of an appreciative and understanding listener in Rose. She had plenty to say, for they had hardly had a moment together all day.

"I hope you feel better, dear," she inquired affectionately. "I really felt anxious about you this morning, Rose! You looked very far from well."

"I've never been as strong as you, sister," said Miss Rose in a low voice.

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And Alice smiled pleasantly. She was a wonderfully strong, hale, and hearty woman for her age; she did not know what it was to feel ill or languid.

According to the old-fashioned point of view, Alice Charnwood would have made a splendid schoolmistress—according to the modern point of view, a splendid colonist's wife.

"I feel worried about that youngest Tranter girl," she said presently. "She is doing no good at home, and yet one hesitates to recommend her mother to send her again to be an under-servant in one of those big London houses."

Miss Rose turned and looked full at her sister.

"Alice," she said, "I asked Mary to go out because I have something I want to say to you."

And then, suddenly, Miss Charnwood for the first time saw that Miss Rose was wearing her old engagement ring.

She felt a shock of pain, of surprise, almost of disgust. But at once she formed an extraordinary—and yet was it such an extraordinary?—theory. She told herself that Alick Stair was dead, and that Rose had received the news that morning. Such a fact would more than account for Rose's agitation and look of illness.

Relief, and a sensation of fierce, unreasoning satisfaction took possession of Alice Charnwood. But she quickly determined that she would betray nothing of these feelings.

"Yes?" she said, and her voice sounded very kindly. "Yes, Rose, what is it you wish to tell me?"

"I wish to tell you—oh, sister, do not be angry"—Rose waited, and then, with trembling lips and dry throat, she uttered the words, "I wish to tell you, Alice, that I am going to be married."

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We have all heard—we may ourselves be in the habit of using the expression, "I would not believe if I heard it with my own ears!" but we know the phrase must not be taken literally, not in the full sense of the words. Alice Charnwood, when she heard her sister Rose's statement, did not believe her own ears. She preferred to think herself the victim of an aural hallucination, or, a far more probable alternative, that Rose's brain had been affected by the sad news she had received that morning, for Alice had now adopted as fact her theory of Alick Stair's death.

She looked at her sister without speaking, and Miss Rose stared back at her with dilated eyes and an expression of pitiful fear on her face.

"What did you say, Rose?" Alice spoke very quietly. "Will you please repeat what you said just now?"

The hand of Miss Rose, the small plump hand on the little finger of which glittered the tiny diamond in her engagement ring, travelled up with an uncertain movement to her breast. It was there she had placed Colonel Stair's letter.

"I said, Alice," her voice trembled, "I said, Alice, that I was going to be married, and that I hoped, oh! dear sister, you don't know how I hope, that you will not be angry with me!"

Alice Charnwood felt a wave of dismay, nay more, of icy terror, come over her.

Then her ears had heard aright? How could she have been so foolish as to suppose herself for a moment in fault!

Rose—poor, poor Rose—had not been able to bear the news of her lover's death.

There came back to the elder sister words a great mental

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specialist had used—how long ago was it?—more than thirty-six years ago. They had made her very angry at the time—that suggestion that Rose's mind might become affected by her grief.

But now——?

Alice Charnwood looked steadily at her sister. Rose was extraordinarily excited. Tears were running down her cheeks, and Miss Alice found herself mechanically counting the little pearly drops as they fell.

"Do speak to me, sister!" and Miss Rose clasped her hands together with a piteous gesture. Then wildly she cried, "I have not deceived you, Alice! At least not for long—only for two days. I only knew two days ago."

"Two days ago?" said Miss Alice soothingly. "Do you mean on Saturday, Rose?"

"Yes," said Rose faintly, "on Saturday! It was on Saturday that he came."

And Miss Alice again felt that curious eerie sensation of dismay, of cold terror steal over her.

"It must have been on Saturday he died," she said to herself, "but Rose can only have received the news to-day; I'm positive of that. I wonder who could have sent it?"

"You mean Alick Stair?" she said quietly.

"Alice! Of course it's Alick! How could it be any one else?" and Rose laughed. It was a happy, almost a girlish laugh, and once more Alice felt that shrinking the sane feel for the daft take hold of her.

"We won't say anything more about it to-night," she said, soothingly. "We'll talk about it to-morrow, dear Rose."

"But he's coming to-morrow," said Rose. And then

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she suddenly bent forward and looked up into her sister's troubled face.

"Oh, Alice!" she murmured. "How good you are not to be angry with me! If only you would promise to be kind to him too?"

"Of course I will make you that promise if it makes you happy, dear Rose," said Alice steadily.

She took her sister's flushed, tearful face in her strong, capable hands, much as if Miss Rose had been a child, and gazed down into the wide-open, pleading eyes.

"And will you forgive him?" asked Miss Rose. "He said you had not forgiven him!"

"I will certainly forgive him, my dear. I know it has not been right of me to cherish the bitter feeling I have done all these years. But, Rose, it was because I loved you—you know that, Rose?"

"Yes—but you will now have to love him too!" exclaimed Miss Rose.

Her face had become transfigured with happiness, and it wrung her sister's heart to look at her.

"I will come up with you now and see you safe into your room," said Miss Alice quietly.

Her busy mind was working—working. Would it be possible to keep this—this strange, pathetic delusion from their friends and neighbours? She hoped so with all her proud, rather hard nature. Mary must be told—so much was clear. And then to-morrow, leaving Mary on guard, she would go to Dilchester and see the old doctor whom they had known all their lives and whom they implicitly trusted. If necessary, if he thought it would be a good thing, she would take Rose away. They would travel, they

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would do anything. A feeling of deep thankfulness came over Alice Charnwood at the remembrance that she had given up her life—sacrificed all she might have done as a young woman—for Rose's sake.

As the two sisters went up the broad, shallow staircase of the Little House, Rose clung to the other's hand. She was in a state of ecstatic happiness—she had not thought it possible that Alice would take the momentous news as Alice had taken it, so gently, so kindly, so—so quietly.

"Shall I come in, Rose?" said Miss Alice a little doubtfully; they were not in the habit of going into each other's bedrooms at night.

"Yes, do, Alice! I should like you to see how I have arranged my presents. I brought them up this evening when I came to change my gown."

And then the quick, observant eyes of Miss Alice became suddenly aware of the little ring-case standing open on the dressing-table.

"You saw I was wearing his ring?" said Miss Rose in a low voice. "But I shan't wear it after to-day, Alice. I thought it would help me while I was telling you my wonderful news. But, of course I know it isn't a suitable ring for a woman of my age. Perhaps he will give me another now. He was always so generous, so very kind to me."

She took off the little ring, kissed it, and put it back into the case. Then stooping down Rose opened the drawer and slipped the case in.

"There!" she said. "Some time to-morrow I shall burn everything in this drawer—not the ring, for that would be foolish, but all his old letters. I want to be a sensible woman now"—she looked appealingly at her sister—"and

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you'll be able to help me, Alice, for you've always been so much more wise than I."

"Would you like me to stay with you to-night?" asked Miss Alice suddenly. In old days, at the Rectory they had shared the same bedroom, but never since they had moved to the Little House.

"Oh, no," said Miss Rose, blushing. "I am quite happy to-night, dear sister. Last night I hardly slept at all."

She turned, and putting up her face kissed her sister gratefully. "You don't know how happy you've made me, Alice," she whispered. "I couldn't have been *really* happy if you had not approved!"

Miss Charnwood closed the door quietly behind her. And then she stood and listened for a moment. She hoped it was quite safe to leave Rose.

She looked at her watch. Why, it was not yet ten o'clock, and yet it seemed as if hours had gone by since Mary had left the house; but now there was nothing to do but to wait, with what patience she could muster, till Mary came back. She felt, as all strong natures do in face of what they believe to be a great calamity, as if strength, a rising tide of strength, had been given her to meet it. Her stout heart did not shrink from the task—the piteous task she believed lay before her.

Alice Charnwood was quite ignorant of how those who dwell on the mysterious borderland which divides sanity and madness live and have their being. She knew that it is quite possible for persons to be sane in every particular save with regard to one permanent delusion, and she supposed that her sister Rose had now joined that great if scattered company of piteous folk.

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She went downstairs, and again into the drawing-room, sitting down heavily in the low chair her sister had sat in. And as she stared into the fire—a thing Miss Alice very seldom did, for her eyes were always busy over some kind of work, generally a garment that had for ultimate destination some old rheumatic villager's person—sad, strange, romantic old stories, stories she had heard in youth, rose to her mind.

First, the tale of a Dilchester girl whose bridegroom had died on their wedding morning, and who had ever remained in a darkened room waiting for his return; and then the curious, terrible French legend, of the woman who, losing her lover in a duel, each day at the moment her lover had fallen heard the shot ring out.

Yes; to such a nature as was hers—strong, self-reliant, and honest—it would be hateful to listen patiently, acquiescently to Alick Stair's praises—but to this she would have to school herself.

Her niece and she would concert together as to what was to be done: and Mary—oh, the comfort of that thought!—could always be trusted to look after Rose if anything happened to her, to Alice Charnwood.

And then at last Miss Alice, with a feeling of deep thankfulness, heard the sound of steps on the lonely road outside. It was plain that Lady Susan, very properly, had sent some one back with Mary, for the steps were those of two walkers. And then suddenly there broke on the stillness the deep tones of Richard Caryll's voice.

Mr. Caryll had evidently dined with Lady Susan, and now he had escorted Mary home. It was just the sort of

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kind, neighbourly thing he would do. Miss Alice could not hear what he was saying, and he seemed to linger unduly, over his good-night.

Alice Charnwood had become very fond of Richard Caryll, and now her mind travelled back to the incident of the flowers sent that morning from Ditch Haven. It seemed days and days ago, instead of only a few hours, since she had made that stupid mistake.

At last she heard the firm footsteps start again—but he was walking slowly, very slowly, away, and Mary Pechell did not come in at once to the lighted drawing-room.

"Mary," called out Miss Alice at last, "will you come here, my dear?"

Mary Pechell walked into the room, and full though Alice Charnwood was of her own great distress, she noticed how glowing, how radiant the girl looked.

And yet Mary was trying to still her beating heart, to forget herself, to push everything but Miss Rose and Miss Rose's affairs out of her happy mind.

"Well?" she said, "well, Aunt Alice?" and there was a sharp, defiant ring in her voice.

It was hard to step down from the moonlit heaven, along whose silver floor she had just paced with Richard Caryll, on to Aunt Alice's dun-coloured earth.

The older woman got up and shut the door. Before doing so she listened for a moment. The house was absolutely quiet; the maids slept in another part of it, over the kitchens.

"I wish to speak to you about your Aunt Rose."

Mary turned and stiffened a little. She pushed the black hood she wore rather forward over her face instead of push-

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ing it back. She did not feel in the mood of battle, but she told herself that she must now battle for Aunt Rose, for Aunt Rose's happiness, for Aunt Rose's very life.

"I felt sure she would tell you as soon as she was alone with you," she said.

"I think you might have prepared, warned me," said Miss Charnwood, and there was a note of deep, reproachful pain in her even voice.

"I could not help knowing it before she told it you, Aunt Alice," Mary spoke very earnestly. "Aunt Rose did not mean to tell me—of that I feel sure—before she told you. But you see I went up into her room, I took the letter——"

"The letter?" said Miss Alice sternly. "When did the letter come?"

"By the second post," said Mary reluctantly.

"Had you prepared me, Mary," said Miss Charnwood, "you would have saved me a great shock."

"Then you don't really mind, Aunt Alice? You were kind to her about it?"

Mary spoke a little breathlessly. Perhaps after all there would be no need to do battle!

"Not mind? Of course I mind, Mary. Be kind? How could I be anything else? Years and years ago I expected something of the sort. She had come to a state when she wouldn't eat—when she would hardly speak. I took her up to a great London doctor, and he warned me that this might happen. But of course I never thought it could happen now—after so many years."

"One's heard of such things," said Mary hesitatingly.

"She thinks he is coming to-morrow," went on Miss Alice slowly; and then, at last, her eyes filled with tears.

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"I suppose, my dear, that she will always think he is coming to-morrow. She seemed so happy, Mary. It wrung my heart."

"But he really is coming to-morrow, Aunt Alice," cried Mary Pechell in a troubled voice. "I sent him a telegram suggesting he should do so. I suppose you saw his letter?" and as she saw the blank look of surprise, deepening into horror, which overcast Miss Charnwood's face, she went on hurriedly, "I saw the letter by accident; in fact, I read it aloud to Aunt Rose! We thought they were the usual birthday letters, and you know how she hates to read handwriting."

"Please speak clearly, Mary. What letter?—whose letter? I don't quite know what you're talking about. We are speaking at cross purposes."

"Colonel Stair's letter, Aunt Alice—the letter in which he asked Aunt Rose to become his wife."

Miss Alice put out her hand instinctively, and took hold of the edge of the marble mantelpiece to steady herself.

"And has your aunt actually answered the letter?" she asked in a still voice.

"But, Aunt Alice, you said you knew? Surely Aunt Rose has told you that she's engaged to Colonel Stair, and that they are to be married quite soon?"

Mary's voice faltered, in spite of her determination to keep it steady.

Then there was to be battle, and fierce battle, after all.

"Yes," said Miss Alice deliberately, "your Aunt Rose did tell me that she was engaged. But Mary—you will take me for a fool, and no doubt I have been a fool—I did not, could not, believe it! It seemed to be far more likely

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—in fact, I preferred to think that Rose was mad. Surely I was not so very unreasonable? How could I have thought that he would dare—dare to come back? And now tell me, Mary—I expect, remember, the truth from *you*—how long has this been going on? Is it true that he came here—here to the Little House—on Saturday?"

"Yes, Colonel Stair and his son came on Saturday," said Mary, "but it was for the first time."

"Ah!" said Miss Alice bitterly. "It's all clear to me now. Rose heard from him on Saturday morning—that was why she was so upset—so queer—so unlike herself. And then she deceived me, shamefully."

"She was right in so doing, Aunt Alice."

Mary was very brave, but she quailed before the other's look of anger and contempt.

"If she had told you, if she had not deceived you—you would have prevented his coming. And she wished to see him—she has never left off loving him!"

Mary waited a moment, and then she added, slowly, "I wish Aunt Rose had shown you his letter. It was really rather a good letter"—she looked pleadingly at Miss Alice.

"Where is he staying? At Dilchester?"

"No, Aunt Alice, he is at Ditch Haven. He and his son are staying there."

"His son?" And then a light broke on Alice. "Then that's the child—'Johnnie'—who sent Rose the flowers this morning?"

Mary nodded. It was just as well to take each trouble, each shock, singly.

"I'm glad you were kind to her—even if you were kind

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only by mistake," said Mary steadily. "She was dreadfully afraid of what you'd feel, of what you'd say, Aunt Alice."

"Have I, then, been so unkind that Rose should be afraid of her only sister?"

"She knows that you have never forgiven him," said Mary.

"I told her to-night that now I would forgive him," said Miss Alice sombrely. "But when I said that, Mary, I thought that Alick Stair was dead."

"Dead?" echoed Mary.

"Yes—I have been a fool—a great fool! I formed the impression that Alick Stair was dead, and that it was the news of his death that had turned my sister's brain."

"But surely, Aunt Alice, anything is better than that would have been?"

But the other went on speaking, in low, bitter accents: "And now he comes—old, broken, poor also no doubt, and bringing a child—to throw himself on Rose's mercy. Well—well!"

"He is not poor," Mary spoke in a rather shame-faced voice. "In this letter he speaks of making a settlement on Aunt Rose—in fact, there is no doubt that he thinks *her* poor, Aunt Alice."

"That certainly makes his conduct a little less monstrous," said Alice slowly.

"I don't think you ought to call his conduct monstrous, Aunt Alice."

"No—perhaps I should not do so. I will not do so after to-night, Mary," and then, "Why are you sure that they did not meet till last Saturday?" asked Miss Alice sud-

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denly. "It's been quick work! The child's message ran as if he had known her a long time."

"I don't think Johnnie is a child," said Mary in an embarrassed voice. "I believe Johnnie is more or less grown up, Aunt Alice."

"Oh, no," said Miss Alice quickly. "Johnnie is certainly a child—it was a child's handwriting on the card, and only a child would have sent such an absurd message after only having just met the person to whom he sent it."

Miss Alice put out the lamp. She and Mary went out into the hall and lit their bedroom candles.

"Well, good-night, my dear,"—and it suddenly seemed to Mary that her aunt had aged, that she had become an old woman.

"I think it is all turning out for the best," said Mary with a lump in her throat.

"I should like to think so," said Miss Alice stiffly.

"But you have promised to forgive him, Aunt Alice?"

"I said I *had* forgiven him," said Miss Alice.

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CHAPTER XXI

Miss Rose never knew, and she was never allowed to have the slightest suspicion, of the fact that for a long hour her sister had cherished so wild and so strange a delusion concerning her mental state.

From the moment the two met at prayers—Rose had been up some time before and out in the garden—Alice Charnwood's face wore a look of grim serenity, if not of happiness.

Mary Pechell, sole confidante of the two older women, felt inclined to laugh and cry by turns. But now, to-day, all her sympathies were with her Aunt Alice, and she was moved to the heart by the efforts the latter made to appear as if nothing untoward had occurred.

During breakfast none of the three made any allusion to what had happened the night before, and yet Miss Alice managed to convey by her brisk, cheerful manner, more than any words could have done, her acquiescence in the amazing event which had just taken place.

At last she went off to the kitchen to give her usual orders for the day, and Miss Rose's voice trembled with happiness and emotion as she exclaimed, "Ah, Mary, how wrong it was of me yesterday to be so afraid—so untrusting! My dear mother used to say that if we could only *trust* all would be well. I have never doubted God's love, Mary, but oh! I did doubt the love of my sister Alice. And see how wrong I was!"

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And love, so Mary happily assured herself, does work miracles. But being still young she was a little pained when she found, in the course of that long morning, that love had by no means driven the old Adam out of Miss Alice.

"I keep wondering how I shall ever be able to bring myself to speak civilly to that man; cordiality he cannot expect!" she said to her niece during the only moment that they were alone together. And Mary, looking up, saw that her aunt's face was convulsed with feeling.

Alice Charnwood was remembering the interview she had had over thirty years ago with Alick Stair in that dreary London hotel.

"I suppose some people find it possible to forget everything," she said slowly. And then a moment later, "I am not thinking of my poor little Rose, Mary. I am thinking of Alick Stair. It is he who has much to remember."

They were all glad of a break caused by the arrival, at twelve o'clock, of Richard Caryll. He had some good excuse for coming, but he might just as well have come with none, for Miss Alice was far too much absorbed in her own and her sister's affairs to give him a thought.

But as Mary walked up with him under the beech-trees towards the open down, he turned fiercely on her and cried, "We must tell them soon! I can't go on like this; I—I want to be with you all the time! There's no need for secrecy. I want to tell Lady Susan; she had no right to tell me you were bespoke."

She was touched, also a little frightened, by his roughness. But even so she pleaded for a little more delay—just two or three days. "Wait till I'm back in London," she said.

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And he assented, asking her pardon, with exaggerated humility, for his lack of patience.

"You see, you don't quite know how much I love you," he said slowly. "All I've set my heart on in life is nothing —nothing to my feeling for you."

Deeply moved she broke what had been, since they had come back to Halkham, an unspoken compact, and clung to him, careless of possible prying eyes, but even so she did not succeed in sending him away happy.

As she walked slowly back to the Little House Mary felt vaguely troubled.

Caryll's varying moods were hard to understand. She felt as if she had only learnt to know him in an intimate sense during the last three days. But she loved him all the more now that she had become conscious of his weakness.

When she was back in the house Miss Charnwood spoke with sudden sharpness of their late visitor.

"I wonder Mr. Caryll doesn't find something to do!" she exclaimed. "It isn't good for a man of his age to be idle. He's evidently getting dull, up at Highways, all alone. See how often he comes here! He's only been home two days, and he's been here three times already. And he dined last evening with Lady Susan!"

Luncheon was a very quiet meal. Miss Rose, glancing timidly at her sister, thought Alice looked sad and stern, and her heart sank.

But after lunch Miss Alice roused herself. "You had better go and lie down, Rose," she said in quite her old cheerful, peremptory way. "I don't suppose that"—she waited a moment, and then dashed out the words—"that Alick and his son will be here before four o'clock, if then."

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And Miss Rose, without even making her usual little protest, obeyed at once.

But she had not gone long before Miss Alice hastened after her.

She went upstairs and walked into her sister's bedroom. Rose lay on her bed, having taken off her shoes, in the attitude a good child might lie. And as Alice stood looking down at the little figure she told herself that after all something worse might have happened, Rose might be dead, instead of going to make this amazing, this unnatural marriage.

Suddenly she bent down and kissed her sister. "Try and go to sleep, like a good girl!" she whispered. "Everything is going to be settled now—as we never thought it would be settled, Rose," and as she saw the other's piteous, questioning look she added, "happily at last."

And then, without giving the other time to falter out an answer, Miss Alice turned and left the room.

It was good to know that she still had Mary left to her. Alice Charnwood, like Lady Susan, felt sure that in time Mary would marry John Ryman. And very pleasant it would be to have her niece mistress of Halkham House.

It was Mary's suggestion that they should have tea in the garden. And four o'clock found the three ladies established there—Mary by far the most agitated of the three, for both the sisters were outwardly quite composed.

At five minutes past four the parlour-maid appeared, followed by a lithe, trim, soldierly figure, and a tall, awkwardly-built young man. "Who can this be?" quoth Miss Alice to herself.

Colonel Stair walked some way in advance of his son.

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He had made up his mind that he would say what he knew must be said to Alice Charnwood at once. But when he saw the tall, elderly, dignified-looking woman who was at once so like and so unlike the handsome high-spirited girl he remembered with so vivid and painful a memory, he forgot the careful, formal words of apology and contrition he had meant to utter.

And all he could stammer out was, "Well, Alice, it's a long, long time since we met."

"Yes, indeed it is—Alick."

Miss Rose had fluttered past, her kind hand outstretched to Johnnie; and the other two turned and listened in silence as she thanked the young man for his birthday gift, while the poor fellow, flushed and happy, for once—or so his father thought and hoped—showed to advantage.

But Alice Charnwood was not deceived.

Instead of a spoilt little boy, to whose existence she had tried to school herself in the last few hours, there stood before her a grown youth whom her long knowledge of cottage folk, their family troubles, secrets, and heroisms, made her at once see to be what she called, in her own mind, with horrified dismay "a zany."

And Colonel Stair, speaking in a far humbler and softer voice than either she or, for the matter of that, any one else, had ever heard him speak in before, whispered, "Rose will have told you about my poor boy?—I'm afraid you must feel—'twould only be natural—that I'm a selfish brute to take advantage of her goodness."

And Miss Alice whispered back, with a touch of the old eager, impetuous passion he remembered, "Not if you make her happy, Alick! I shall be quite satisfied if you only

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make Rose happy"—she suppressed the words "at last," which it had been on the tip of her tongue to utter.

And then, to her mingled surprise and annoyance, Alice Charnwood, looking round for Mary Pechell—for it was high time some one should introduce Colonel Stair to his future niece—saw that Mary, having left the little knot of people standing together, was shaking hands with Richard Caryll.

By some mistake, some absurd lack of forethought, the parlour-maid had not been told that the Misses Charnwood were not at home to any one that afternoon excepting of course to Colonel Stair and to his son! But nothing could be done now but to behave as if the unwelcome guest were simply one of several ordinary visitors.

Rather to Miss Charnwood's discomfiture, Mr. Caryll—who, it seemed, had only come to bring Mary a gardening book he had promised her that morning—spent most of his time walking about the garden with his hostess's niece. Twice they very kindly tried to make Johnnie Stair accompany them, but each time he drifted helplessly back to Miss Rose's side, remaining silent, contentedly listening while his three elders talked over times of which he had never heard, and mentioned people most of whom had long been dead.

At last his father addressed him: "And now, Johnnie, we must tell these ladies something of our house-hunting expedition."

And Miss Alice told herself that Alick Stair had indeed lost no time. All that morning—indeed, till just before they came to the Little House—father and son had been inspecting houses in the neighbourhood.

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"One of the agents sent me to Southgate." He turned to Miss Rose, and Alice, watching him with the oddest mixture of jealousy and suspicion, told herself that there was certainly a look of solicitude, almost of tenderness, on his thin, parchment-coloured face. "I seem to have retained a pleasant memory of Southgate."

"Yes, Alick; we once spent a very happy afternoon at Southgate when dear old Mrs. James lived there," said Miss Rose softly.

"Of all the places we have seen in the last two days Southgate is the one I like best," went on Colonel Stair thoughtfully.

Southgate? To Alice Charnwood, Southgate seemed a very long way from Halkham. Mechanically she said to herself that, after all, perhaps it would be for the best. Married people were happiest left to themselves. She had often and often repeated that trite saying to the type of cottage mother who likes to have her girl or her boy married close to her own front door.

But now, for the first time, Miss Alice knew what it was to feel that the creature she had always loved best in the world was going to leave her.

"Absurd!" she said to herself. "It's only three miles, after all! Even now I think nothing of three miles," and then floated into her mind the lines from the *Christian Year:*

> Why should we faint and fear to live alone
> Since all alone, so Heaven has willed, we die?

But she got up rather hurriedly, and walked towards her niece and Mr. Caryll; and as she did so a sudden and

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most unpleasant suspicion darted through Miss Alice's mind. It would not do at all for the owner of Highways to fall in love with Mary! They really knew nothing of him —he was much too old, and then—then there was John Ryman? In her heart Alice Charnwood also thought her niece bespoke.

Caryll held out his hand. "I must go now," he said. "I only came for a moment." And Miss Alice told herself uncomfortably that it had been a very long moment.

When Mary and her aunt, each silent, again approached the tea-table they found Colonel Stair and Miss Rose already discussing the sizes of the rooms at Southgate.

"And then the bowling alley?" said Colonel Stair eagerly. "I at once thought how nice it would be to have a bowling alley! One seldom finds one in the grounds of so small a place. As a young man I was very fond of bowls."

"You played a game there on the afternoon we went over," said Miss Rose gently.

"Did I, indeed? Now, that had quite slipped my memory! Isn't that odd? Now, that's very interesting, isn't it, Johnnie? D'you hear that, my boy? As a young man I played a game of bowls in that very alley we walked down to-day. But I confess the fact had *quite* slipped *my* memory."

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CHAPTER XXII

John Ryman was walking from Westminster to St. James's Street across St. James's Park. He walked slowly, thoroughly ill at ease and dissatisfied. He had called on Mary Pechell at a time she was almost always in, that is, during the half hour that usually followed her return from the daily work to which she was so faithful. But to-day he had been told she was not yet home.

Then he had gone on to the dark little office of the Home Workers' Union. Mary sometimes stayed on there long after four o'clock. But though he had knocked and knocked there had come no answer.

Only ten days had gone by since he had paid the unsatisfactory call which had been interrupted so unpleasantly, so ruthlessly, by Richard Caryll; and that very same evening he had written to Miss Pechell inviting her to go to a lecture with him. But she had answered in a kind, colourless little note, simply refusing the invitation, and giving no reason for her refusal.

Then he had again called, only to learn that she had gone to Halkham. How stupid of him to have forgotten! Of course, she had said she was going down for Miss Rose's birthday. Ryman had been sorely tempted to go down there after her. But he had restrained himself. That would not be carrying out his part of the bargain, and tactically it would have been a mistake.

Was it possible, conceivable, that Mary meant to avoid

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him? No, for that would be most unfair, as well as disproved by her behaviour at the ball. At Stane Palace no one would have thought—he least of all—that there was any change in their former friendly and cordial relationship.

And then, as he came out of the park, he looked at the newspaper bills. "Death of a Railway Magnate." "A Famous Railway Man Dead"—at once all thought of Mary Pechell and his own intimate affairs were lifted from John Ryman's mind. For he suddenly knew that a thing had happened which somehow he had thought would not happen for many a long year.

Mannyton, the managing director, the virtual dictator of the Grand Junction Railway, was dead! And he, John Ryman, would now reign in the dead man's stead. Ever since he had grown-up that had been his wish and secret ambition.

He bought a halfpenny paper, waiting and exacting from the guttersnipe who sold it him the change out of a penny. And then he looked at the announcement:—"We regret to state that Mr. Gustavus Mannyton, managing director of the Grand Junction Railway, died this afternoon at his residence, the Tower House, Rosetree Hill, of heart failure superseding inflammation of the lungs."

The other directors had all thought Mannyton was dying. But he, Ryman, had not believed it. Somehow he had thought Mannyton would get over this illness—Mannyton had got over so much else. . . .

He stood thinking deeply for a moment, then he took a cab and drove down to the offices of the railway.

There, or so it seemed to John Ryman, every one treated

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him with a new deference, a new respect. Yes, the death of Mannyton was indeed a stroke of good fortune for him, and of not unmerited good fortune, for it was Ryman money, and above all Ryman brains, which had started the Grand Junction, which, if small among railways, was yet a great and a very prosperous undertaking.

Ryman dined at his club, and then he sat down and wrote to Mary Pechell. He felt he must write and tell the news to some one, and somehow he thought she would understand and sympathize. Last winter he had often talked to her about business matters, and she had always been sympathetic as well as intelligent.

And though it was against John Ryman's social code to pay an evening call on an unmarried lady, he told himself that he might as well take a little more exercise—a man never walks enough in town—and slip his letter into her letter-box.

But he would not go till he had read all that the evening papers had to say about Mannyton.

As he had known would be the case, in all the papers there were accounts of Mannyton and the man's remarkable career. But it vexed Ryman shrewdly that there was no allusion, in any of these accounts, to his own father—to the man who had first provided Mannyton with the necessary capital, and without whose high business standing and personal integrity Mannyton could have done nothing with regard to the Grand Junction.

Suddenly a card was brought in to him. It bore the name of a great morning paper.

Ryman had a certain dislike of the Press, but just now he felt hurt at the neglect of his father, and perhaps, at

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the back of his mind, of the utter neglect of himself. He was mentioned in each of these accounts, but only as having been a co-director of Mannyton—one of a crowd.

Yes, he might as well see the reporter. At any rate, one paper should have the truth.

And as a result of Ryman's determination a very excellent and well-informed account of Mannyton, far the best that appeared in the Press, came out the next day in the *Courier*. But, oddly enough, it was the only account which Mrs. Mannyton, the widow, thought inadequate.

When the reporter left the club it was close on eleven. Ryman hesitated as to whether he would post his letter to Mary Pechell, but he felt wide awake, and again he told himself that a walk before going back to his rooms would do him good.

Feeling better pleased, both with himself and with the world at large, than he had done for some time, he walked, this time in the pleasant, moonlit darkness, once more across the Park, and so round by the Houses of Parliament to the quiet, cobble-paved street down which, according to tradition, the old Pretender was carried as a baby on his way of escape to France.

Even now this little street, and the groups of narrow thoroughfares to which it belongs, might be in some remote corner of a cathedral town, instead of in the heart of London.

Ryman's footsteps were the only sounds he heard, and instinctively he trod softly as he went up to the door of the tiny eighteenth-century house where Mary lived.

And then, to his surprise, he saw that there was still a light burning in her sitting-room. She was mistress of the

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two ground-floor rooms, having characteristically left the best rooms, those above, to her cousin.

A different type of man from John Ryman would have broken through his rule for once and rung the bell, and being human the idea of doing so did cross his mind, but he thrust it away.

Still, for his imagination was very much alive to-night, it seemed probable that his friend—he had never before thought of any woman as a friend—was sitting up writing letters. If so, it was certain that she, being what she was, would come out and post them herself at the end of the street. And for that possible piece of good fortune he was surely entitled to wait awhile.

Having dropped his letter into her letter-box he walked across the narrow street and ensconced himself in the deep embrasure some vandal had made twenty years before in the old wall opposite—that low thick wall so well and strongly builded by the Benedictines of St. Peter's, Westminster, close, so says tradition, on a thousand years ago; the oldest wall, behind which is sunk the oldest garden, in London.

There was little more than the width of a country lane between Ryman and the pavement opposite.

Is it a kind or a cruel, a merciful or a sardonic, Providence which has decreed that even the immediate future should be shrouded impenetrably from us poor human beings?

As John Ryman stood there, content with himself and with all the world, no inner voice told him to savour those few moments to the full, as being the last he would ever

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spend of complete and cloudless satisfaction. So far was this from what actually happened that, as he stood there, he almost felt as if the unexpected death of Mannyton was a good omen for his future relations to Mary Pechell.

He had never thought Mannyton would die, or rather, while knowing that Mannyton must die some day, he had thought the man would live on to be a thorn in his, John Ryman's, flesh for many a long year to come, till he, Ryman, was middle-aged, not to say old.

As he stood there, in the deep, black shadow cast by the old gas lamp jutting out of the wall, Ryman's mind even wandered good-naturedly to Violet Segrave. He must get her a wedding present—after all, he had known the Segraves a long time, and though he had never liked the mother, he had always had a kindly feeling for the girls. He remembered that four or five years ago some one had spoken to him of the clergyman's liking for Violet Segrave, adding thoughtfully that she would never think of him—that Mrs. Segrave would never allow it. And yet now it had come to pass, and every one was well pleased!

The front door of Mary Pechell's house suddenly opened —wide. And against the brightly illuminated background provided by the narrow white-panelled passage two figures leapt out before John Ryman's amazed eyes in sharp silhouette. They were those of Mary herself and that of a man.

John Ryman held his breath. It seemed to him that his heart stopped beating in his body—for Mary turning, took hold of the man's arm. And the man—Ryman saw that it was Richard Caryll—put his free hand up and

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smoothed back her fair hair with a fond, familiar, caressing gesture.

They moved a little way back into the passage, Mary still leaning against the open door; and as they did so a globe of light above the fanlight lit her glowing face upturned to Caryll's, while across the little street there floated whispered words—her words, "Good night. Oh, my dear love, good night!"

Ryman turned and groped blindly for the wall. For the first time he knew what pity was, but it was pity, intense, acute pity for himself. He had not known that any human being could suffer as he was suffering now.

After what seemed to him an eternity—it was two or three moments only—the house door shut, and then came the sound of Caryll's footfalls going away.

At the end of the street Caryll stopped. Now he was posting Mary's letters. The fact gave Ryman an added sense of bitter outrage.

Then Caryll disappeared round the corner.

Ryman waited till first the light in the passage was put out and then that in the little sitting-room. Then he too went down the street. . . .

John Ryman did not go to bed till very late that night. He was in a state of anguished jealousy as well as of disappointment, and it was a feeling which tortured him the more because it was quite new to him. He was amazed to find how much it hurt—and how degraded it made him feel in his own sight.

His savage envy of Caryll roused into life more than one primitive instinct he had not known he possessed.

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He felt that he would like to kill, to obliterate from human life, the man who had known how to awaken in Mary Pechell's eyes a look he had never thought to see there—the look of surrender he, Ryman, had schooled himself never to expect, and that even if she became, as he had thought she surely would do, if only he were patient, his affectionate and dutiful wife.

Though he would have given everything he had in the world—and much he valued his material possessions—to have heard her say to him the words he had overheard her utter to Richard Caryll, to have seen her turn up her face to his as she had turned it up towards that other man, he yet felt that she was lowered in his sight.

Misfortune, disappointment, personal disaster of the kind most men meet with early in life had never really touched John Ryman, and he had no weapon with which to fight them.

But what added the last and most torturing pang to his agony was the fact that his supplanter should be—of all men in the world—Richard Caryll. So he told himself again and again during the long solitary tramp he took that night through the dreary London streets.

At last he went back to his rooms and tried to work. There was plenty for him to do, of an uninteresting, not very urgent kind. Mannyton had been an important figure in the railway world, and a good many people in that world had already, in the few hours which had elapsed, written private letters of condolence and inquiry to John Ryman, letters which would all have to be answered some time, some of them in his own hand.

But he found he could not write, he could not even com-

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pose the formal notes which must be dispatched within the next few days.

At last he went to bed. He would have liked to have sat up all night chewing the cud of his bitter jealousy; but the habitual lawfulness of his nature and character prevailed.

He went to bed, but not to sleep. The shock of what he had seen awoke in the man what had always hitherto slumbered in him—imagination. He visualized Richard Caryll in the enjoyment of all that was to be denied to himself.

Ryman had put Mary Pechell on a pedestal, on as high a pedestal as it was in his power to put any woman, and now she had fallen from her pedestal.

He wondered with angry pain and suspicion how long it had all been going on. Had she already loved Richard Caryll when she had said, in that quiet, reasonable voice of hers, the only voice he had known till he had heard her eager passionate accents to-night, that she would never marry? And if not, if she had been sincere that day, how amazingly quickly the thing must have come about!

To John Ryman, Richard Caryll himself was singularly unattractive—that manner which slid from awkward uncertainty to irritating self-possession, odious; and, as regarded Lady Susan, that assumption of familiar if deferential intimacy unjustified.

And yet there must be something in the man—first Lady Susan and now Mary Pechell! Sitting up in bed he laughed aloud, an eerie, solitary laugh at the juxtaposition. What fools women were!

His soul sickened at the thought of what lay before him

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during the next few days. There would be Mannyton's funeral—a large, pompous funeral, attended by a considerable number of City men, as well as by a deputation of the staff of the railway Mannyton had practically founded, and whose varying fortunes he had at intervals so nearly wrecked.

But the long night dragged to an end at last, and early in the morning there came to John Ryman the first real sign of his new power. This was the appearance of one of his co-directors, a man named Potter.

Potter was, in a sense, the younger man's creature on the Board, for Potter had owed all his success in life to Ryman's father.

The man had begun life as a humble clerk in the Transfer Department of the railway, and the Rymans had never been on terms of social acquaintance with him and his, as they had been, for instance, with Mr. and Mrs. Mannyton.

But now Mr. and Mrs. Potter lived not far from where Mannyton lay dead, and it was to discuss the details connected with what was to be in a special sense a Grand Junks funeral, that Potter had hurried up to town.

Ryman accepted the eagerly proposed invitation to luncheon after the funeral tendered to him by Potter. It was an easy way of doing Potter a civility.

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CHAPTER XXIII

The day of Gustavus Mannyton's funeral!

From the moment John Ryman reached Waterloo Station, and began to be greeted first by one and then by another black-coated, solemn-faced figure, his spirits lightened, and he was able to thrust Mary Pechell and Richard Caryll into the back of his mind.

The way Mannyton's official mourners treated him was gratifying, all the more so that his pride and self-esteem had been so sharply wounded.

A man's contemporaries naturally gather at his funeral, and the majority of the men collected before the special train were much older than John Ryman, but one and all showed him marked deference. He was now, they felt, master of the destinies of the Grand Junction Railway.

The journey in the saloon carriage passed pleasantly and quickly. The talk was all of the dead man, and, as the talk is apt to be on such an occasion, almost entirely to the dead man's credit. Mannyton's unusual generosity, Mannyton's power of triumphing over difficulties, a scheme of profit-sharing he had cleverly evolved in connexion with one of his other undertakings, were praised and highly commended. Then some one alluded with a look tantamount to a wink to the great railway magnate's wonderful vitality, his powers of enjoyment when not working.

"Very unlike those American Johnnies to whom *The Herald* compared him!" "That's why he popped off as

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he did—you can't work as Mannyton did and play too" —and for a moment a silence fell on the company.

"Do you know the widow?" a voice asked soberly; and as several of the men present shook their heads, Ryman spoke, almost for the first time since the train had started. "I have known Mrs. Mannyton all my life. She was a friend of my mother."

"Mannyton very seldom asked anyone home," said the man who had asked the question. "He had a great respect for his wife." And a sympathetic, understanding grin went round the railway carriage.

Ryman's face alone remained unchanged. He had no clue to the odd look which had come on the faces of those about him. It was the first time he had ever heard Mannyton spoken of freely outside his, John Ryman's, own intimate family circle. He had often heard his father speak of Mannyton with impatience, fear, and, well, yes, with a certain unwilling respect.

Two men opposite him began talking in a low voice, but he heard snatches of their talk.

"No one can tell what will happen now. Manny would never let the railway go, but I expect that now the Cambrians will have it all their own way," and Ryman felt a wave of hot anger sweep over him.

These men spoke as if the railway had belonged to Mannyton—Mannyton, who could have done nothing had he not been backed by the elder Ryman in the long, long ago, forty years back, when the railway fever had cooled, and when it was very difficult to get money or power to start new lines.

The train began to slow down.

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"Rosetree Green? Here we are!" cried some one. "I'm told it's the only suburb within twelve miles of London where land is still going up steadily. But Mannyton always was lucky! He had a lot of property about here."

Then they got out—an outwardly solemn, an inwardly jovial, company.

Rows and rows of well-appointed mourning carriages were waiting to take the mourners to the house. John Ryman would have preferred to walk. It was close by, not ten minutes from the station.

He had been down here three days ago, and had had a stiff, rather touching, interview with the stern widow, Mrs. Mannyton. He liked as well as respected her. He knew that whatever influence she had possessed with her brilliant, unscrupulous husband had been thrown into the scale on the side of his being made a director.

It seemed quite right, to himself natural, that Mrs. Mannyton should choose him, rather than her own brother, to drive in the carriage with her to the cemetery. But as he helped her into the brougham he felt how little she needed his support.

Mrs. Mannyton was tall, thin, and fair, bearing lightly her sixty-three years of life. She had always been in everything the very opposite of her husband. Mannyton had been short, and latterly very stout, with a round pink face, and loose, generous lips, always ready to break into a broad smile. He had managed both his friends and his temporary enemies—for he never bore a grudge—by smiles and a kind of radiant, authoritative determination of manner which outlasted the patience of even the harshest and most suspicious of his adversaries. Mrs. Mannyton

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had always been an ill-tempered, rather ailing woman, but honest, upright, and ever doing that which she thought her duty.

They two, John Ryman and Mannyton's widow, drove along for awhile in silence, and then suddenly Mrs. Mannyton turned round and looked into the young man's moody face.

"John," she said, "you will of course stay and hear the will read? I have asked that it be read immediately after we get back to the house. I do not propose to be present. Many years ago, within a few years of our marriage, my husband made a very handsome settlement on me. We were not then as prosperous as we became."

She pressed her lips together and shook her head. There was condemnation in the shake.

"He had claims on him"—Mrs. Mannyton waited a moment—"claims about which I was supposed to know nothing, and concerning which he did not consult me. These claims are mentioned in the will. That, John, is why I do not think it would be fitting I should be present at the reading. I do not know if you are aware that he made you one of his executors?"

"No," he said quickly. "I was not aware of that! I think Mr. Mannyton ought to have asked if I was willing to act. I—I am extremely surprised, Mrs. Mannyton."

"I was surprised, too," she said calmly, "and perhaps I ought to have told you the other day, but he begged that you should not be told anything about it till the day of the funeral. He told me that he wished you to drive with me as we are driving now, and he asked me to tell you then."

"And who is the other executor?" asked Ryman.

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"Mr. Potter. My husband had a great opinion of Mr. Potter. He knew honesty when he saw it."

Potter? That choice was even more strange. Mannyton had always disliked Potter as much as it seemed possible to him to dislike anyone. As for honesty—well, Mannyton had always seemed to regard honesty as quite a subordinate virtue.

The carriage rolled slowly on. Ryman was of two minds concerning the executorship. But in his heart he knew he would accept. Potter would take the weight of it off him.

It was pleasant to know that Potter was absolutely "straight." The word "honest" has gone out of fashion among business men.

Ryman wondered how much money Mannyton had left. He had no idea. Mannyton had always known how to keep everything concerning his private affairs very close —in fact, he was very secretive, as those cheerful, happy, round-faced little men so often are.

"I should just like to tell you one more thing, John." There had come a touch of uncertainty and even of discomfort in the widow's even voice. "You must not be surprised at my husband's having left Mr. Potter £100,000."

John Ryman looked round. He was indeed surprised; nay, more, astounded.

There was something so peculiar in the way Mrs. Mannyton had uttered the simple words that he felt sure something lay behind it, and the next thing she said confirmed this view.

"I need hardly tell you, John, that the money is not for Mr. Potter's own use." Mrs. Mannyton spoke very deliberately, but she did not turn round and look at Ry-

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man as she spoke. Instead, she stared straight before her. "It's only left to him in connexion with that unfortunate Wigney affair, John."

"Wigney affair?" he echoed doubtfully.

Then she turned round quickly, and a startled, apprehensive look came over her fair, faded face.

"Surely your father told you of the Wigney affair? If not—well, then Mr. Potter will tell you. You certainly ought not to be kept in ignorance now that you are a director." She spoke as if in answer, in protest, to some unheard voice.

"My husband gave the matter very deep and very anxious consideration, and he believed up to the end that he had acted rightly—or rather that he had advised the others to act as he himself thought best. I myself should have done otherwise, but as you know, John, Mr. Mannyton and I did not always agree as to a given course."

John nodded. *The Wigney affair?* No; the name, the words roused no echo in his mind. He felt sure his father had never mentioned the Wigney affair.

"But at the end," went on Mrs. Mannyton steadily, "he did come round to my view in so far that he came to see that he owed some reparation to the shareholders. And after consulting me—he always trusted me, John, and though he did not always follow my advice at the time, he often did later—he set aside this large sum for the purpose."

Now John Ryman was not surprised, not even particularly interested in this confidence of Mrs. Mannyton's. The dead man had done very queer things in his time. Doubtless in connexion with this mysterious Wigney affair

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he had gone just a little farther than even his elastic conscience—when he was on his death-bed—thought proper.

Of far more moment to John Ryman than any question of conscience-money posthumously paid by his late co-director, was the fact that he had been left Mannyton's executor.

Again he wondered uncomfortably what exactly this would mean? And again there was comfort in the thought that he would be able to put a great deal of the more tiresome side of the work on good, honest, plodding Potter —Potter who remained, even to this day, almost embarrassingly grateful for all John's father had done for him.

It was not much more than half an hour later, and yet here they were, a group of fourteen people, sitting round Mannyton's long, handsome dining-table, waiting for the will to be read.

The widow had arranged everything, even to the precedence in which those present at the reading were to sit. Thus Ryman was at the right of the solicitor, and Potter at the left. Then followed, according to their ages, a number of more or less intimate friends—it would have been truer to have styled them boon companions—of the dead man; and grouped about the other end of the table six relatives, a woman and five men, none of them prosperous-looking, and all nervous and eager.

Ryman knew the large, scantily-furnished room well; he had been familiar with it in his childhood, for his mother had been very fond of Mrs. Mannyton, and in a way the two women had been intimate. But after his mother's death he had come very seldom, as seldom as he could, to

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Tower House, for he had inherited his father's dislike and distrust of Mannyton.

Even so this room was to him full of associations. It recalled his quiet well-bred mother and Mrs. Mannyton —scarcely Mannyton at all. And he looked up with affectionate knowledge at the four great Landseers on the walls—Landseers flanked each by a smaller picture of cattle or sheep by Sidney Cooper.

Nothing had been altered, nothing had been added to the room since Ryman was a little boy.

The large light mahogany sideboard, aimlessly, and as he now knew hideously, carved in the early Victorian fashion, stretched across the top end of the room. The dull red leather of the saddle-back chairs had never been renewed, and had gone rather shabby. In a corner, near the bow-window giving on the beautiful if very prim garden, was a fine wine-cooler of the Chippendale period, and Ryman made up his mind that if, in days to come, a sale were ever held in the house, he would try to secure that wine-cooler. He did not think that Lady Susan possessed such a one at Halkham House, and it would look well in the oval dining-room.

In a quick, unofficial tone the solicitor prefaced his reading of the will with the words, "Mr. Mannyton, gentlemen, left approximately three hundred thousand pounds."

There was a slight stir of surprise. Only the faces of Mr. Mannyton's distant cousins brightened when they heard the sum mentioned. They had all been treated with discriminating generosity by the testator in the past, but each hoped that now a really large sum would be left him. Ryman, looking down the table maliciously told himself

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that they were dividing three hundred thousand pounds by six and finding the result very pleasant. True, in a few moments they would be undeceived as to a third portion of the sum.

Every one else present thought that "Manny," as most of them called him among themselves, would have cut up far better than that.

"Perhaps I ought to say," continued the lawyer, as if in excuse for the smallness of the sum, "that this is exclusive of a large settlement Mr. Mannyton made, over thirty years ago, on Mrs. Mannyton."

Mr. Mannyton was as merciful in death as he had generally been in life. He did not, that is, keep those to whom the matter was of real moment in suspense, and the first items in his will dealt with the legacies to his relations.

But alas! for those who had cherished great hopes. The family legacies did not together total more than twenty-five thousand pounds. Also the testator had awarded his legacies strictly according to order of merit; they bore no relation to the age, the sex, or to the closeness of the recipient's relationship to the defunct. Thus the largest sum, seven thousand pounds, was awarded to the only woman present. She had worked hard for something like fifteen years, keeping a sick mother out of her work. She was the only legatee who showed emotion. When the figure followed by her name was read out her face became illumined with a look of extraordinary thankfulness and peace.

The next largest legacy, four thousand pounds, was left to a hard-faced young clerk—a cousin Mannyton had got into a shipping office when he was nineteen, and who was now making three pounds a week. It had been this man's

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ambition to go to Canada; now he would be able to fulfil it, and under the best conditions. But he did not look pleased; he looked angry and disappointed; he had evidently expected far more.

And then, at last, they came to what most of those present considered real business. There were four legacies of twenty thousand pounds apiece left to people whose names some of those present had never even heard. The names of Mr. Mannyton's fortunate legatees were—Jane Glidden, now of 16 Long Row, Manchester; Sophia Jones, widow of the late Thomas Jones, now residing at The Steyn, Brighton; Anna Maria Johnworthy, of Leamington; and, lastly, Adèle Perrier, of 6, Coppice Place West, Regent's Park. When the lawyer read out the last name Mannyton's five old friends exchanged looks of sympathetic intelligence.

A sum of five thousand pounds was also left in trust to be divided between Julius and Mary Jane Glidden, not to be handed over to the recipients in the one case till he was thirty years of age, in the other till the young woman in question attained the age of twenty-five.

John Ryman, making a quick calculation, told himself that these various personal legacies amounted to about a hundred and sixty thousand pounds.

Then came small gifts to friends and acquaintances, and several handsome sums were left to benevolent funds and societies connected with the railway.

Lastly, a bequest of one hundred thousand pounds to Enoch James Potter was briefly announced.

To Ryman's surprise the sum was left absolutely, and those present who knew Potter naturally congratulated

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him warmly on this pleasant accession to his fortune. These congratulations he received with an air of sheepish gratitude.

After the reading of the will, the two men whom Mr. Mannyton had chosen as executors outstayed the others, and soon they were informed that Mrs. Mannyton wished to see them.

"You will act, John?" she asked anxiously. "I trust you will consent to act?"

And though he had now almost made up his mind to reject the executorship, Ryman found himself saying that yes, he would act. There was, to his mind, something infinitely pathetic about poor Mrs. Mannyton.

To the other man she simply said, "You see that I was right, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, you were, Mrs. Mannyton. I've very seldom found you wrong."

And there came over her face a look of frosty triumph.

"I always knew," she said firmly, "that in the end Gustavus would do the right thing about that matter."

It seemed to Ryman that as she said those words Potter looked at him a little apprehensively. He himself was again queerly, emotionally touched. Never before had he heard Mrs. Mannyton allude to her husband by his Christian name.

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CHAPTER XXIV

There were still mourning-carriages waiting in front of the large portico.

"It's about a mile to my house. Would you rather drive or walk?" asked Potter rather sharply.

"I'd much rather walk," answered Ryman good-humouredly. He was glad to be out of the still, melancholy house of mourning: and they set off at a brisk pace.

For a while neither of the two said anything, and then Potter broke a silence which was becoming oppressive.

"Poor Mannyton!" he exclaimed. "He ought to have made really old bones. Our doctor said that to me only yesterday. But there! He didn't only work hard, he lived hard: and he thought hard, too. He had a wonderful brain, had Mannyton!"

"I always thought he looked remarkably healthy, and much younger than his years," said Ryman coldly.

"Yes, that's true! that's true!" cried the other eagerly. "But still he did wear himself out. Better to wear out than rust out, eh? what? You know that house we've just—well, Mannyton came down there very little, very little indeed—it's a lucky chance, a lucky chance indeed, that he died there!"

"Surely he came down every night," said Ryman, astonished. "I always saw him when I came here."

"Of course you did!" Potter laughed. "He was always here when he wanted to be here. But his real home—I

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mean, of course, lately, during the last few years—well, you know where that was, Ryman?"

"No," said John Ryman, staring at him, "I've no idea what you mean."

"Why, Coppice Place West, of course! Pretty, cosy little place—very unlike the house we've just left, Ryman."

"Indeed!" said Ryman shortly. He resented the confidence. It filled him with disgust. "By the way," he said abruptly, "I wish you'd tell me something of the Wigney affair."

Potter stopped dead short in the road on which they were walking.

"The Wigney affair?" he repeated in a tone out of which he found it impossible to keep acute dismay and astonishment. "What do *you* know about the Wigney affair, Ryman?"

He looked so angry, so heated, so—so caught—that Ryman went through a moment of extreme discomfiture. Then Potter—Potter, the honest man on whose integrity he would have staked his life—was as other men so often are, or as they become in the face of a sudden temptation! Was it conceivable that, secure in the belief that no one now living knew anything of the Wigney affair, save perhaps Mannyton's widow, who obviously had every reason to hold her tongue, if this were indeed conscience-money—Potter meant to stick to the £100,000?

"Look here! I want to know about this! Excuse my asking you, Ryman, but how long is it since you first heard of the Wigney affair? Did Mannyton know you knew? I ask because at the time it happened, we all, including most certainly your father—who once he had consented

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to secrecy was most insistent the whole matter should be hushed up—gave a solemn undertaking that each would never tell a living soul."

"My father kept his word," said Ryman coldly. "He never spoke of the matter to me. It was not from my father I learnt anything of the Wigney affair."

His father? How could *his* father have been concerned in any queer or shady transaction?

"Then who on earth told you? Not Farman—surely not Farman?" Farman was the head of the great firm of chartered accountants who had been associated with the fortunes of the Grand Junction since the first rail was laid down.

"Farman?" echoed Ryman uneasily. "You don't mean to say that Farman was in it too?"

"Up to the neck!" said the other, with a rather savage laugh. "Up to the neck, Ryman! It's Mr. Farman's father who ought to have left that £100,000—not Mannyton."

Ryman felt a thrill of relief shoot through him, and the relief was almost tantamount to the sudden deadening of physical pain.

"But before we go any further—who did tell you? Come, you owe me that, Ryman!"

"Mrs. Mannyton," admitted Ryman, reluctantly.

And then, to his amazement, the other burst out into a series of sharp oaths—cursing Mannyton, cursing Mrs. Mannyton, cursing the female sex in general.

"Short of this I wouldn't have believed it! I wouldn't have thought it of Mannyton! Then I suppose all the others know it—Sophy—no, she was before the Wigney

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affair—but Mrs. Jones certainly, and I expect that sly Mamselle too! A pretty opportunity for blackmail if they'd only known it! And they'd have had an easy victim in Farman—he was terribly put out about it—never was the same man after!"

Ryman was now determined to know everything there was to know.

"I suppose you've got all the papers," he said, drawing a bow at a venture.

"I've got the very little there is," said the other sullenly. "Mannyton sent for me about ten days before he died and handed me over all he had. I was proposing to destroy everything this afternoon."

"There was certainly nothing among my father's papers."

"Your father had so little to do with it," said the other shortly. "Farman thought everything *was* destroyed. But of course Mannyton was far too cute for that—he always kept anything that gave him a hold on friend or enemy."

They walked on in silence for some moments.

"If you can spare the time, I'll tell you all there is to be told after lunch," said Potter at last. "I don't suppose Mrs. Mannyton went into much detail."

"No," said Ryman hesitatingly, "she did not go into much detail."

And then, to his extreme amazement, the older man suddenly put his hand on his arm.

"Ryman!" he exclaimed feelingly, "your father behaved awfully well to me over that business! He only consented to hush the matter up for my sake;"—his voice was

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charged with emotion—"and I trust I repaid him—I trust I repaid him for his confidence. Farman always thought I was in it. He thought so right up to his death. Mannyton thought so too for a bit, but he ended by knowing me better. Only your father always believed me to be an honest man."

Ah, then that was why Potter had been so horrified just now? He too was in it—in this mysterious Wigney affair! He had been to blame in some way—or, if not to blame, he had been suspected. Ryman thought he saw his way clear. He was now sorry he had stirred up old mud. It was on the tip of his tongue to say, "Well, don't trouble to tell me anything more about it."

But his habitual cool sense of what was due to himself came to the man. After all, he might as well know what there was to know. It was evidently something which had affected the early fortunes of the railway.

Wigney? Wigney? Was Wigney a man, a place, an estate? His excellent memory gave him no clue.

It was an hour and a half later. John Ryman, as in duty bound, had spent a few minutes in the drawing-room with good-natured, kindly Mrs. Potter and her merry daughters, and now at last he and Potter were alone in the latter's study.

Motioning Ryman to a chair, his co-director unlocked a safe and took out of it a small dispatch-box. He put it on his writing-table.

"The papers are all here," he said heavily. "I think that after you've looked over them you'll agree that the time has come to destroy them."

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"Before I look at them I wish you'd tell me your version of the story," said Ryman. "You must remember, Potter, that I know no details. To begin with, who and what was Wigney?"

This again was a bow at a venture. Again he wondered if Wigney was a place, a person, or an estate. The beginnings of every railway have given wonderful chances to romance.

"You may well ask that!" exclaimed the other ruefully. "Wigney? Well, I need hardly tell you, Ryman, that Wigney was a very extraordinary individual. I have cause to remember Wigney—aye, and to curse Wigney with all my soul! But still I acknowledge—I admit that he was an amazing creature, and one who would have got on in the world—if only he had been content to wait."

"But how did he become connected with the Grand Junction?" asked Ryman.

"In the simplest way in the world! In fact, through your father, or rather through a friend of your father—big family solicitor, you know the sort—more than respectable, with a South of England connexion."

"You don't mean Mr. Evans, of Evans, Foster, and Garnett?"

"Yes, I do. Those were the people! But mind you, *they* were never told anything." He looked uneasily at the younger man.

"I quite understand that," said Ryman quickly. "You needn't be afraid I shall ever say a word of what you're telling me, Potter. But would you explain to me exactly what this man Wigney *did* do?"

But the other went on almost as if he had not heard the question:

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"Yes, Evans, Foster, and Garnett were kept quite out of it. From the very beginning Wigney was quite the gentleman, a favourite with us all. As for the Gov.—Mannyton I mean, we called him the Gov. in those days—he grew exceedingly fond of Wigney, used to have him down here, and at his other place too, though he was quite a young fellow, and it was a shame to do that. And very soon Wigney singled me out, Ryman." Potter looked deprecatingly at his companion. "I was a great deal older than he was, and of course I had a very much better salary than he had—but, well—I daresay you'll think I was a fool—I didn't know how to spend it! I hadn't met Mrs. Potter then. I thought Wigney wonderful—and he *was* wonderful; he knew all about books and pictures—he wasn't a bit like the other youngsters I knew."

"Wasn't he?" said Ryman patiently.

"No, he was quite the gentleman. And his mother—he once took me to his home—was a gentlewoman. You could see that with half an eye. His father had been ruined years before, and Wigney was a great credit to his mother. He wasn't much more than twenty when he came to us, and I was nearer forty than thirty—but, well, I was a fool—that's all I can say, I was a fool!"

"Don't say that, Potter."

"It's my one excuse." There was a short silence. "Then you know what happened?"

"Tell me," said Ryman, bending forward.

"Well, to put it shortly, Wigney, once in the Transfer Department, brought stock into the company's books in favour of a group of non-existent persons."

"Of non-existent persons?" echoed Ryman loudly, incredulously.

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"Yes, young Wigney was a wonderful man—there was genius in Wigney! He forged on a tremendous scale. He really created stock, and I suppose that almost anybody but your father would have believed that he did it with my help."

"With your help?" again echoed Ryman, in that loud, incredulous tone. It seemed to him as if a terrible pit yawned at his feet; what had happened only twenty years ago might surely happen again to-day.

"Yes, with my help. It's decent of Mother Mannyton not to have told you that part of the business. Yes, I was in it up to the neck, most people would say. If Wigney had had to take his trial I should have taken mine along with him."

"But—but how was such a thing possible!" stammered Ryman.

And then, as if the other could read his secret thought, Potter shook his head.

"It wouldn't happen now, Ryman, and most people would have said it couldn't have happened then! But you see it just did. Our system of registration simply invited forgery, and of course we weren't the only ones. In those days share certificates were only stamped with the Secretary's name, and the sum each coupon represented was just filled in with ink—anyhow! I remember your father saying to me afterwards that it was very fortunate for us and for every one else, that no one, till Wigney came along, had ever thought of perpetrating this crime.

"And how long did it go on?" said Ryman hoarsely.

"Oh, I suppose two or three years from the time Wigney

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got into the Transfer Department till he knew the game was up."

"How did you come in?"

"When he wanted a witness—a real witness—then he turned to me!"

"To you, Potter?"

"Yes, to me," answered Potter in a hard voice. "A lot of these forged transfers were witnessed by me. At one time he held stock—fictitious stock—to the amount of a hundred thousand pounds in fictitious holders' names."

"And what was Farman about?"

"Ah, you may well say that!" cried Potter bitterly. "Farman didn't find anything was wrong for three years—and then it wasn't Farman who found it out. It was Mannyton."

"D'you mean to say that for three years our company paid dividends on a hundred thousand non-existent capital?"

"Yes, that is so, Ryman. But I don't quite understand what you mean about the three years—the interest's being paid to this day."

Ryman jumped up from his chair.

"To this day?" he repeated. "But—but—Potter—the directors—you and I?"

Potter nodded his head, and looked nervously round the room.

"You needn't speak so loud, Ryman. A hundred thousand pounds is a lot of money invested, but it's a very little money—indeed, the dividend on a hundred thousand pounds is a very little money—when you consider our whole capital."

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"Good God!" exclaimed Ryman. "Good God! And you say that my father consented that this should go on?"

"The circumstances were very peculiar," said Potter uneasily. "I won't have you blaming your father—your father was the best man I've ever known, Ryman. I honestly believe that he gave in to the others to save me. And then had the thing been made public it would have done untold harm to the railway. You see, both Mannyton and Gerard—you remember Gerard, Ryman——?"

Ryman nodded his head.

"Well, they did a good bit of speculation themselves—bought, held, and sold heavy parcels of our stock under other people's names. You understand? Oh, no, it wouldn't have suited Mannyton and Gerard at all for the thing to have come out! But Wigney—just think of that boy, he was little else, working such a daring fraud on a wealthy and, as we then held, well-managed company, and in the face of directors, auditors, clients, shareholders—some of whom you must remember, Ryman, took a good deal of personal, close interest in the management."

"I suppose once Farman got on the track of the fraud, proof was easy?"

"Quite easy," said Potter sadly, "only too easy in fact! Wonderful good names and addresses he'd found. I remember I myself went up to Hampstead to try and discover a woman called Harris. Somehow I believed in Mrs. Harris—but there wasn't any Mrs. Harris."

Ryman burst into harsh laughter; "Wigney was evidently a well-read man!"

"Yes, you may well say that. He'd taken all his fic-

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titious stockholders out of books. I remember particularly a Colonel Newcome, who lived at Adsum Cottage, Charterhouse Lane. Old Farman said to me—I shan't forget it in a hurry—'That *proves* that you were in it!' And then there was a Mrs. Jellaby too."

"And—and you never guessed?"

"Of course not! How could I? But we did end in finding his broker. He speculated a good bit; in fact, his dealings were on quite a large scale. By the time the exposure came he held hardly any of our stock."

"*Our* stock?" queried Ryman dryly.

"Well, the stock he'd invented, Ryman. He'd worked it off—very cleverly too! Waiting for a rise each time."

"What on earth made him bring you into it—if, as I suppose, he forged all the other names?"

"I can't tell you why he did it," said Potter sullenly. "All that I can say is that he did. And now, looking back, I'm not surprised that Farman began by believing that the whole thing was a juggle got up between us. But I think they might have believed me when I was able to prove that I had never spent a penny beyond my salary. Oh, I shall never forget that time, Ryman! I was just engaged to be married! But I should never have come to trial, I'd have killed myself first. In fact, if it hadn't been for the dear kind soul who is now my wife, I think I should have killed myself anyway. You see, at first your father was determined to make the whole thing public."

"Then they let Wigney go free?" said Ryman slowly. "Incredible! Absolutely incredible! If you were not sitting there telling me this story—and if there were not proof of what you are telling me—I would not believe it,

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either of my father, or of any other set of even moderately honest men."

"They didn't let Wigney go free," protested Potter eagerly, "at least that's not the way to put it. Wigney committed suicide, or if he didn't commit suicide—Mannyton never believed he had—then it was an uncommonly good imitation. He left a letter—I think you'll find it in that box; Mannyton once told me he had kept it—making a clean breast of the whole thing. With it he sent a cheque for over twenty thousand pounds—think of that, Ryman! —a cheque which was honoured. He confessed he'd bought an annuity for his mother, and that was quite true. The old lady is living on it now—it brings in five hundred a year. He said he'd lost all the rest in speculation. But Mannyton never believed that."

"Then he was allowed to escape?"

"He can't have lost a minute. I suppose he'd long made up his mind what to do."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, within twenty-four hours of the time Mannyton asked him some casual question showing he was on the track of the truth, his last letter arrived at the office. By the same post his poor mother got one from some desolate little seaside place in Wales saying that he was tired of his life, and was going out in a boat as far as he could drift to throw himself into the water. Days afterwards an empty boat containing his clothes *was* found a long way down the coast. Mannyton went down himself and saw Mrs. Wigney, but it was clear she knew nothing—never had known anything! All she knew was that her son had always believed himself entitled to some big estate or title,

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somewhere in Sussex, I think, and her view was that the notion had preyed on his mind. She allowed the Gov. to look over all his things, but, of course, nothing was found."

"And then?"

"I'll tell you a curious thing Ryman. Mannyton didn't tell Mrs. Wigney one word of what her rascal of a son had done! That may have been kindness of heart, or it may have been artfulness—perhaps a mixture of both. He was quaint, was Mannyton! Would you believe that he used to go and see those women—there was an aunt, a Miss Wigney, as well as the mother—quite regularly twice a year? I think he always hoped he would find out something. But if there was anything to find out, they kept their own counsel. He never heard a word which could give him any reason to suppose that Wigney's end was not what was supposed. But a queer thing did happen."

Potter lowered his voice and went on.

"Five years after the business came out a big sum was sent anonymously from Brazil to our Widows' and Orphans' Fund. Then two years later another twenty thousand to the Secretary of the Almshouses. For years money came from all over the world for these Funds."

"Then no one has suffered excepting our shareholders?"

"Well, Ryman, that's a rather hard way of putting it! Farmans did pay some blood-money. Whenever possible shares were bought up and destroyed."

Ryman looked at his co-director curiously. "But the fraud has gone on?"

"Well, if you choose to put it so," said the other uncom-

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fortably, "I suppose it has gone on! But let me just remind you of this—if the case had come in any way into Court, Grand Junks would have been terribly depreciated, Ryman. That's what Farman and Mannyton put to your father when they persuaded him to hush it all up. I expect it did influence him—as, indeed, it ought to have done."

Ryman gave no look, no word of assent.

"And now," said Potter, "would you care to glance over the contents of that box? We might then consult as to what had better be done with them, and how Mannyton's hundred thou' can best be utilized."

Potter detached a key from his own watch-chain and handed it to the other man.

"Just begin looking over what's in there," he said. "I've just remembered something I must say to the Missis —a message from Mrs. Mannyton. I shan't be long. I'll be back in a few minutes."

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CHAPTER XXV

Ryman waited till Potter had shut the door, and then he turned the key and lifted back the lid of the dispatch-box.

He stared down, as if fascinated, at the half-dozen slender packets of letters and handful of loose papers which now represented all that was left of the story of a gigantic fraud.

Lying loosely on the top—the dispatch-box was not much more than half full—was a folio sheet of paper and a letter pinned together. With an odd feeling of fear and surprise he saw that the letter was in his own father's familiar handwriting.

DEAR MANNYTON,

Yes, I think this is all right.

Yours truly,

ROBERT RYMAN.

And then he turned over the stiff, old-fashioned bit of notepaper, and looked at what his father had considered "all right."

Across the top of the piece of folio paper was written, "Add to new report. R. R."

The paper itself ran as follows:—

To the Chairman and Directors of the Grand Junction Railway Company (Limited).

GENTLEMEN,

The accounts and books in every department continue to be so satisfactorily kept that we have simply to express our entire approval

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of them, and to present them to you for the information of the shareholders with our usual certificate of their correctness.

We have the honour to remain, gentlemen, your very faithful and most obedient servants,

(Signed)

GERALD E. FARMAN, JAMES MORSE, } Auditors.

And then, again in his father's handwriting, had been added a date. It was exactly twenty-three years and four months ago.

Ryman thoughtfully turned the sheet of paper round in his fingers, and there, in Mannyton's small, exquisitely clear handwriting, he read the caustic, merciless comment:

The valuable result of the audit! Books admirably kept. The accounts are duly vouched for by Messrs. Farman and Morse; their correctness certified, though the mere trifle of about a hundred thousand pounds forged stock recorded in them, carrying a dividend of some four thousand pounds per annum, has been overlooked!

That seemed the only scrap of Mannyton's own handwriting in the box. There were letters, many letters, at which Ryman only just glanced and then averted his eyes, for they were piteous, self-abasing pleas for mercy from Potter. And there were a good many letters from Farman, the great accountant—angry, bluffing, cringing letters, full of terrible calls for vengeance on the forger Wigney.

But what filled Ryman with a painful, intimate interest, and, yes, dread, were the letters from his own father. These he read through carefully; and one, after a long moment of hesitation, he put into his pocket. That letter ran as follows:

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DEAR MANNYTON,

I have thought over very carefully the facts which you and Farman placed before me yesterday afternoon, and I reluctantly admit that there is a great deal to be said for your point of view. I am also influenced by the fact that, to the best of my belief, Potter is an absolutely honest man, and if all this business were to come out in any public way, it is Potter—Wigney being dead, or presumed to be dead—who would be the scapegoat. And, thanks to his abject folly and ignorance of life, I doubt if he would escape.

All this being so, I have brought myself to consent to do what you wish. But in that case I agree with Farman that every vestige of proof must be destroyed. And, further, that we must each give a solemn undertaking—in which, of course, Potter must be included—to regard the whole of this shameful business as if it had not been. I regret that I do not agree with Farman as to the advisability of our making up the sum of four thousand a year among ourselves. That could not be done without some proof remaining on record each year. I think that you, as a man of business, will agree with me about this. God knows I should not grudge my share of the sacrifice, but I think the loss can be made up otherwise to the shareholders; and the sum, as you yourself observed yesterday, is but a fleabite in the general dividend.

And then, just as Potter had sworn when he had been told of Mrs. Mannyton's betrayal, so Ryman now swore a furious oath under his breath. For across the bottom of his father's letter, just below the signature, were written more words in Mannyton's handwriting—caustic, merciless words:

So much for honest Robert! Looking after himself as usual.

And with a horrible feeling of shame, a feeling which was quite new to him, the son looked round at the door,

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and put his father's letter into his pocket. He was determined that Potter should never see that letter.

Held together by a piece of elastic which had gone hard, and which broke when he tried to pull it asunder, were a bundle of the fatal forged certificates—little slips of red paper carelessly endorsed with a rubber stamp, and the amounts written in, as had been the imprudent custom of that time, in ink.

Ryman stared down at the coupons. The company had indeed laid itself open to fraud! The extraordinary thing was that the crime had not been perpetrated earlier and to an even greater extent.

Mannyton had kept everything that compromised his fellow-directors and the auditors, nothing that could injure himself. But still he had not been clever enough to prevent the fact of his having been, to use poor Potter's favourite expression, "up to the neck" in the affair from coming out in the internal evidence provided by the documents he had kept. But with characteristic cleverness, with that power which he had always possessed of leaving the unessential thing aside, there seemed to be nothing in the box concerning the personality of the forger, of the mysterious, extraordinary youth Wigney.

But, stay—yes, there was! Under all the other letters and documents, separated from the rest by a piece of clean, flesh-coloured blotting-paper, were two large envelopes, and on one of them Mannyton had written the words, "Wigney's Credentials." Ryman thrust his fingers in and drew out a small envelope addressed to Mannyton himself. Inside there was a letter which ran:

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EVANS, FOSTER, AND GARNETT,
19, OLD BROAD STREET BUILDINGS, E. C.

DEAR MR. MANNYTON,

At the suggestion of my friend and client, Mr. Robert Ryman, I write to you concerning a young man in whose future we are both interested.

Ryman stared down at the words. How did his father come to be in any way interested in Wigney?

The youth in question, who is little more than a boy, in fact he is only just twenty, is the son and the grandson of valued sometime clients of my firm. But were it not that I believe him to be of quite exceptional ability and character, I should not venture to commend him to your notice. I am anxious to find for him a position of trust, something different to a clerkship. But for a number of curious circumstances with which I need not trouble you, my young friend would now be fourteenth Earl of Wolferstan. His father was the only son of the twelfth (and last) earl.

Ryman, still holding the letter in his hand, sat down suddenly.

A suspicion, a fierce secret hope, which filled him with unreasoning exultation, flooded his mind. True, the name Wigney conveyed nothing to him—but Wolferstan? *Wolferstan?* Only son, only son—the words stared out at him from the paper. If the story Richard Caryll had told to Lady Susan were true, or even half true, then he and this scoundrel, this forger Wigney——

Ryman thrust aside for a moment the logical train of thought, of conviction, that had flashed across him.

Then he read on:

Were there such a thing as luck, one would say ill-luck pursued this young man. Owing to the elder Wigney's folly and extrava-

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gance, the fine fortune left to him by Lord Wolferstan went in a few years. This boy had to be taken away from Harrow at the end of his first term. The father then died, I have reason to fear, by his own hand, leaving him and his mother in very poor circumstances. He is able, he is ambitious, he is—to use a much-abused term—a gentleman. I should esteem it a great favour if you would allow me to give him a note of introduction to you.

Yours faithfully,

ANGUS J. EVANS.

Ryman took up the other letter of commendation. Though more cautiously, more coldly worded than that of the lawyer, it contained words of praise from a man named Frantwood, a Government official, who was distantly related to Mrs. Wigney.

The second large envelope was also endorsed in Mannyton's handwriting: "Wigney's last letter, and his cheque." The letter inside, written in a remarkably good, firm, and clear hand, ran as follows:

GENTLEMEN,—

I cannot but regret having put you, as I fear I have done, to considerable inconvenience. I venture, however, to hope that my cheque (enclosed) will to a certain extent mitigate any trouble I may have caused you, and render it, I trust, unnecessary for what has occurred to be made public.

Not that I am ashamed of what I have done. Without troubling you with my family history, I may observe that owing to a number of peculiar circumstances, and circumstances with which neither I nor, I thank God, my late father had to do, I was born outside the law. Therefore the laws made for those who have had the good fortune to be born within the law do not concern me. Even had I been successful in my scheme of outwitting the law, society would still have owed me a very heavy debt, and one which society could never pay. From the ethical point of view, my conduct has not been

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more blameworthy than that which I have seen constantly practised since I first joined what are called "business circles." There is, to my mind, only one gentleman among you worthy of the name of honest man. As to the others, they are not in a position to throw stones from their glasshouses.

Less fortunate than some among you, gentlemen, I have speculated unsuccessfully. The cheque I enclose represents what I have saved from the wreck. I trust you will not consider it necessary to disturb the arrangements I made to provide my mother and my aunt with a small annuity.

I remain, gentlemen, yours faithfully,

RICHARD C. WIGNEY.

P. S.—Perhaps I ought to add that Potter was my dupe, not my accomplice. Also that you will have further news of me within a few hours of receiving this letter. Cash the cheque at once.

And pinned below the last significant words—Mannyton had always been fond of pinning documents together—was the cheque, the cheque for twenty thousand pounds, duly honoured.

Ryman put the letter carefully back into the large envelope—and sat back in the armchair. His enemy had indeed been delivered into his hands—and by Mannyton!

He wondered whether Mannyton would have been glad or sorry. Probably sorry, for Mannyton had always been too good-natured.

No wonder Caryll—ah, but he, Ryman, must get out of thinking of that swindler as Caryll—no wonder *Wigney* had felt alarmed at Stane Palace. Yet, how quickly he had recovered himself! What an amazing nerve the fellow must have!

But no nerve would avail him now.

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Ryman jumped up and began walking up and down the room.

If only this had happened a month, nay, a week ago! He writhed at the thought of Mary Pechell held to that swindler's heart. . . .

At that moment Potter bustled in.

"Well," he said nervously, "Well, Ryman, you know it all now?"

"Yes. I know it all now. I take it I can have these papers? I should like to examine them at my leisure."

The other man hesitated.

"We are joint executors," observed Ryman carelessly —and Potter gave way.

"All right," he said hurriedly. "Take the dispatch-box. But don't leave it in the train! It means a good bit to *me*, you know. Once you have studied the papers at your leisure they may as well be destroyed, eh, Ryman?"

"I suppose so," said the younger man reluctantly. He added to himself that they might be made to do useful work first.

When he reached the rooms he called "home," he found a letter from Mary Pechell announcing, very simply and as to a dear friend, her engagement to Richard Caryll.

As Ryman put Mannyton's dispatch-box in his safe, he told himself that all he would exact from the man Mary thought she loved was his instant disappearance. Let Caryll go—disappear, as he had once already disappeared —taking his booty with him, so long as he left Mary behind.

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CHAPTER XXVI

Lady Susan was resting in her sitting-room with the morning paper spread out before her.

She did not wait, as so many of her neighbours did, for the second post to bring her the London papers. A boy went down from Halkham House to Cleeping every morning and brought *The Times* and *The Morning Post* from the station.

She was now looking over the Court page, and a curious smile hovered over her old lips as she read the account of Mannyton's funeral.

"John was certainly born under a lucky star," she murmured to herself, aware that the death of Mannyton meant that John Ryman was now virtual dictator of the railway line which his family had founded.

Lady Susan had not seen Mannyton for fifteen years, but during the lifetime of her brother-in-law she had sometimes, perhaps half a dozen times in all, come in contact with him.

And Mannyton was not a man who allowed himself to be forgotten. Lady Susan had always liked the rogue, and got on with him most excellently well; on one occasion he had given Lady Susan good advice—just a hint—which had saved her quite a tidy piece of money. It had not had to do with anything concerning his own railway—he was too shrewd a man for that—it had to do with some Greek stock, and the memory of those few words, and how useful they had been to her now switched Lady Susan's

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mind off to Richard Caryll, who on a more recent occasion had also given her good advice.

The owner of Highways spent a great deal of time in London just now, and the mistress of Halkham House had received a letter from him that very morning saying that he would be back very soon, and that he had a great piece of news to tell her which he hoped would please as well as surprise her.

"He is going to be married," the old lady told herself with a touch of regret. She found it difficult to visualize the future Mrs. Caryll. When Caryll had said he did not mean to marry—or, at any rate, not for some time—Lady Susan had believed him.

But he had said a word or two in his letter as if she were concerned in his news! That might refer to the fact that she had advised him to seek a wife—she remembered the conversation quite well; or it might mean that he had met the lady in question at the ball for which Lady Susan had procured him an invitation. He had been very grateful to her over that little matter, and she had been touched by his gratitude. How his face had glowed when he had come to see her the next day! How strong, how vigorous, how handsome he had looked—not at all like a man who had been up all night!

The door opened, very quietly, behind her. Lady Susan turned round quickly. With great surprise and a quick sense of impending discomfort she saw her nephew, John Ryman, advancing into the room.

She allowed the great sheet of newspaper to slip on to the floor, and got up.

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"John?" she said inquiringly. "John, I had no idea you were staying near here!"

"I've just come from town," he said abruptly.

"From town?" said Lady Susan. "You must have started very, very early."

"Yes, I did—by the first train."

"And you've walked from Cleeping?"

"Yes, Aunt Susan, I've walked from Cleeping."

"Have you had any breakfast, John?"

He looked at her as if puzzled for a moment. "I had a cup of tea before I started," he said indifferently, "but I'm not in the least hungry, thank you."

Had Lady Susan Baliol possessed husband, child, brother, or sister, John's strange manner would have struck a chill at her heart, made her presage some great misfortune. As it was, she looked at him with cool astonishment—even displeasure.

What did this strange behaviour, this sudden, unexpected visit, mean? Had he had a great blow to his fortune? Lady Susan could not imagine anything else which could make John Ryman look as he looked now. He was pale, his eyes red-rimmed with want of sleep, and his look of authoritative self-assurance was in abeyance.

"May I lock the door?" he said. "I want to speak to you, Aunt Susan, and I don't wish any one to interrupt us."

"No," she said firmly, "I do not wish you to lock the door. But if you ring the bell I will give instructions that we are not disturbed."

He obeyed her without a word. And then, when the butler came. "Ask Mrs. Jelf to get ready a good break-

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fast for Mr. John. He will go to the dining-room when he is ready for it. Till then I do not wish to be disturbed."

"Now, John," she said quietly, as soon as the man had gone, "come and sit down, and tell me to what I owe the unexpected pleasure of your early visit."

"I expect you already know a part of what I have come to tell you," he said bitterly.

Lady Susan shook her head.

"No," she said, "I know nothing at all. Is it anything connected with the railway, John? Have you found out any fresh villainy of that villain Mannyton?"

He looked up at her sharply, but made no answer. Instead he took a letter out of his breast pocket. "I received this last night," he said.

Lady Susan took the letter. She saw that it was in Mary Pechell's handwriting. Ah, so this was the matter with John! But who would ever have thought that he would have taken it so hard?

She felt a little touched, even a little troubled and remorseful. She ought not to have spoken as she had spoken to him just now. It was his heart, not his pocket which was affected.

She read the short letter through slowly—once—twice—thrice. Then she looked up and said very kindly:

"I'm sorry, John—truly sorry. I was quite ignorant that this was going on. I must ask you to believe me when I say that I not only knew nothing, but that I did not in any way bring the two together. I don't think they ever met here more than twice during the whole of the summer. Richard Caryll has known how to keep his counsel wonderfully well."

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And in truth Lady Susan was deeply surprised—it might almost be said deeply troubled. It seemed to her that neither Mary nor Caryll had treated her well. She had been a good friend to them both. Why, then, this secrecy—it almost seemed to her, this treachery?

"It must have been a smite," she said musingly, "what the French call a *coup de foudre*. Why, he hasn't known her more than three—" and then the last word upon her lips remained unspoken, for she had suddenly looked straight at the young man sitting opposite to her; his elbows were resting on his knees, and his face was covered in his hands.

She got up and laid a firm, kindly hand on his shoulder.

"You mustn't take it like that!" she said. "You and she are very different, John. Even if all had gone exactly as we wished it to do, I don't know that it would have been a success."

"Whether a success or no, I shall marry Mary Pechell yet," he said in a hard voice. "Of course, it won't be the same thing—of course I shall never, never be able to forget what happened any more than she will be able to forget it." And his dark face became convulsed with pain, with anger.

Lady Susan looked at him with a sympathy which surprised herself. This was a John Ryman she did not know—an unrestrained, lawless, unscrupulous man. And yet it was a John Ryman whom she could understand and sympathize with better than with the correct, successful embodiment of all the virtues she had hitherto known.

"You're surprised to hear me say that!" he went on, speaking in low, harsh tones. "You think I'm mad with

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jealousy, with disappointment. But I'm not, Aunt Susan. I'm not! You can take my word for it that I shall marry Mary Pechell; not just yet but in time—I don't mind how long I've got to wait—when she's had time to get over all this business—this black, horrible business."

"What d'you mean?" she said sternly, and she took her hand off his broad shoulder.

He looked at her without speaking, and a very painful suspicion came over Lady Susan Baliol.

"D'you mean that you've got proof the man's married already, John?"

"Worse than that!" he said.

"Worse than that?"

"Yes. Richard Caryll—but that's not his name, Aunt Susan, his real name is Wigney——"

"I've always known that," she said quietly.

"What—you knew that?"

An eager, vindictive look came over John Ryman's ravaged face.

"Yes, his father was always called Wigney. Wigney was the name Lord Wolferstan's children were compelled to adopt by some collateral relations of Lord Wolferstan. Though these people had no right to the name of Caryll themselves, they violently objected to any one else taking it."

"Richard Wigney, *alias* Caryll, is a swindler, a thief, and a forger."

Ryman got up and began walking about the room.

"A forger?" Lady Susan repeated uncertainly. "A swindler, John? You are making terrible allegations against this man."

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"I've all the proofs with me should you care to look at them! They're in a box I left in the hall, in the oak cupboard. Here's the key of the cupboard."

And the young man held out the long rusty key which, within Lady Susan's memory, had never been turned in its lock.

And then, again sitting down, but this time bolt upright, and never taking his eyes from her face, John Ryman told her briefly, and with careful lucidity, the story of the great fraud. He was gliding quickly over what he felt to be dangerous ground, when Lady Susan tripped him up—and smartly.

"What part did your father play in this strange business?" she asked suddenly.

"No part at all, Aunt Susan. What part could he play? He was in a cleft stick. He would have preferred to make the matter public, but Mannyton was convinced that Wigney was dead."

"Also it would have been a very serious thing for the directors, eh, John?"

He nodded; and then she asked him another probing question—and one which caused Ryman to move uneasily in his chair, for when he answered, his answer was only technically true.

"I suppose the directors gradually redeemed all the forged stock and destroyed it?"

"Yes, Aunt Susan, that is still being done."

"I wonder if I ever held any of it?" she said musingly.

"Oh, that's most unlikely! You see, the amount was small when one considers the whole capital of the railway."

And then for some moments neither spoke.

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A terrible sense of lassitude had come over John Ryman. He had not slept for two nights, but his brain was so over-excited that he felt as if he would never be able to sleep again.

"And now tell me what it is you propose to do?"

Lady Susan looked at her nephew fixedly as she asked the question.

Ryman hesitated. He hardly knew himself what he meant to do! The natural man would have liked to bring Caryll to public shame, to punish him with the terrible severity the law keeps in reserve for those who tamper with property. But he knew that that would be difficult, and from almost every point of view most undesirable.

No, all he wanted—he had thought it over very deeply, indeed he had thought of nothing else since that scene in Potter's study—was that Wigney, *alias* Caryll, should be obliterated, should disappear as he had disappeared before. The man had been once content to die—to die to England, to die to his mother, to die to everything that had apparently made life worth living for such a man as he had seemed to be. Well, Caryll must die again—die to England, die to Highways, above all, die to Mary Pechell.

"I propose to make him disappear," he said slowly.

"I wonder if he would consent to do that?" Lady Susan spoke, and it angered Ryman, as if a choice were open to Caryll.

"I have him at my mercy," he said roughly; "absolutely at my mercy! Nothing could injure the railway now. But we shall never get within sight of the Courts. That is why I came down here and told you all about it,

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Aunt Susan. I want you to help me with this. Not for my sake——"

His face was working with emotion, with jealous anguish. Again he saw the two figures clasped heart to heart, again he heard the thrill in Mary Pechell's voice. . . .

"If you mean that you wish me to tell Mary," Lady Susan said, "I decline to do it. And if she's the sort of young woman I take her to be—and I know her pretty well, John—nothing I could say would make the slightest impression on her. She'd require every word, every accusation, to be confirmed by Caryll himself before she'd believe a word against him."

"I don't wish you to speak to her"—again a spasm of pain disfigured Ryman's face—"I wish you to speak to *him*. I want you to make him understand, not only that he must go—that will be easy enough—but that he must write to Mary releasing her, making her understand what the position really is. I don't ask you to do it for me—I know you've never liked me"—their eyes met for a moment and neither flinched from the other's gaze—"but you do care for *her*. And it's for her I ask you to do this thing."

"I'll do it," said Lady Susan quietly. "But—but if Richard Caryll refuses to go—what then, John?"

"Then *I* will tackle him," and there was that in Ryman's voice which made the old woman looking at him shrink with a feeling very unfamiliar to her nature—a feeling of fear.

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CHAPTER XXVII

During the three days that followed the inhabitants of Halkham were thrilled by three happenings, each of which might have provided the neighbourhood for quite a long time with a welcome dish of gossip.

The most interesting of these occurrences, at any rate to the older folk, both gentle and simple, was the engagement of Miss Rose Charnwood to her old lover. Wonderful stories were soon afloat concerning Colonel Stair's dramatic, unheralded appearance at the Little House; pleasant the rumours of his vast wealth; cautious the allusions to his eccentric son; but most welcome was the soon undoubted fact that it was his intention to settle at Southgate.

Second in importance to that bit of news was the engagement of Miss Rose's niece, Mary Pechell, to the new owner of Highways. But that announcement did not surprise the neighbourhood as much as might have been expected by one unfamiliar with the amenities of English village life.

A good many people, it seemed, had suspected what was going on. Mr. Caryll's frequent calls at the Little House had been noted, and it was naturally supposed that his constant attendance on Lady Susan was due to Miss Pechell's being so much at Halkham House.

But the happening which really made the most sensation was the sudden mysterious illness of Lady Susan Baliol.

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One fine morning, after having—so it leaked out—a long interview with her nephew, who had come mysteriously from London, and as mysteriously departed within an hour, she went to bed and lay there, hour after hour, refusing to see a doctor.

Now, this was the first time Lady Susan had taken to her bed in the memory of Halkham man or woman, and the sensation was proportionately great.

Some bold spirits hinted that she was actually dead, and that the fact, owing to a wish expressed of course before her death, was being kept concealed for a while!

Her servants, Scotch one and all, kept their own and their mistress's counsel in the most aggravating manner.

But they, too, if the truth had been known, were sadly perplexed and disturbed. It was the fact that Lady Susan had gone to bed within a quarter of an hour of her nephew's departure. There she had stayed, sometimes taking up a book or a paper, but mostly doing nothing; lying wide awake, staring at the wall, and obstinately refusing to see any one, even the bailiff on important estate business.

Miss Pechell called again and again; and as for Mr. Caryll, he was most constant in his inquiries. As was natural under the circumstances in which they now found themselves, he and the young lady very often came together to the door of Halkham House. But the answer sent down was invariably the same: "Her ladyship's love," or "Lady Susan's thanks for kind inquiries. She is not feeling well, and is keeping her room."

But that sensation came to an abrupt end.

On the fourth day of her illness it became known in the

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village that Lady Susan had suddenly risen at her usual time, sent a note to Highways, and then ordered her carriage!

So she was not dying after all, and the many speculations made as to what would follow her decease had been so much waste of breath?

"She'll live to bury me and thee, mother," an old farmer, who had had a sharp tiff with Lady Susan the year before, grunted out to his wife. But he would have changed his opinion if he had seen the owner of his farm.

Lady Susan had altered very much in the three days; she had perceptibly aged since she had gone, with that dramatic suddenness, to bed. Even the old coachman shook his head when he saw his mistress, and he was taken aback when he was ordered to drive to the Castle Farm.

"The air will do me good," said Lady Susan briskly, "and the exercise will do the horses good."

The three days she had spent upstairs in her room had been perhaps the most painful three days in Lady Susan's life. She had gone through periods of far greater suffering, but she had never felt overwhelmed as she did now with a sensation of perplexity and distress.

Shame on John Ryman to have put on her so terrible a task as that she had accepted, and above all shame on Gustavus Mannyton for having left so cruel and brutal a legacy to those who came after him!

And then one night she suddenly made up her mind that she would have herself conveyed to Highways, and do what she had to do there, in the unfortunate man's own house.

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But the business must not be bungled. She must make sure Caryll would be there—and alone.

So it was that the first thing Lady Susan raised herself to do after what had been in very truth an illness—an illness of the mind—was the writing of a note to Caryll. It was the first time that she had written to him since the letter he had sent her from London hinting at his engagement.

In the course of writing what had to be something of an answer to that happy, that triumphant, note, Lady Susan did what she had never done before—she made more than one rough copy of what she wished to say. At last this is what she wrote:

My dear Mr. Caryll,

I have been, as you know, ill, so I could not answer your letter. I have of course by now heard your news, and it has surprised me very much——

It was there that she had stuck, not once, but many times. In one of the rough copies she had added, "I need hardly tell you how fortunate I think any man who has won Mary Pechell's love——" But then she had felt the horrible irony of writing such a thing to the man from whom she was going to wrench away that love. And so, at last, she left out of her note all reference to Mary Pechell:

I propose to call on you this afternoon after three o'clock, and I should be obliged if you could so arrange that my interview with you shall be private.

A verbal answer will suffice.

Yours very truly,

Susan Baliol.

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And then, again after much painful hesitation, she had added a postscript:

"Prepare for ill news."

And to the writer's relief only a verbal answer, stating that Mr. Caryll would be very pleased to see her ladyship at 3.30, had been sent back.

The start was made soon after Lady Susan's spare luncheon, for the coachman had declared that his horses would take a full hour to cover the distance between Halkham House and the Castle Farm.

But how short seemed the long winding road up the great face of Highways Hill! How terribly quickly the pair of fat old carriage horses seemed to breast each step of the steep way!

Lady Susan had insisted on having the lumbering old carriage open, despite the respectful protest of her maid and of the butler.

"Nonsense! It's a splendid day. One of the finest October days I remember. I'm not going to mew myself up in the brougham. The air will do me good."

But more than once, in spite of its being a sunny, windless day, Lady Susan shivered under her Shetland shawls and thick silk cloak, and her feet, though resting on a hot bottle, seemed very cold.

She felt old—old and languid. John Ryman would not have much longer to wait for what he regarded as his inheritance, and a feeling very like hate for her husband's nephew filled Lady Susan's heart. It irked her to admit that good fortune seemed likely ever to be his, for how extraordinarily lucky John Ryman had always been!

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Take Mannyton's death—premature in these days of long-lived folk—and now this dramatic interposition of Providence concerning Mary Pechell!

Lady Susan shivered again, and drew her cloak more closely about her, as she saw in what she called her mind's eye John Ryman married to Mary—reigning at Halkham House hard, prosperous, singularly lucky to the end of what would probably be a long and honoured life.

And Richard Caryll? Lady Susan's note had had one curious effect. It had roused the fighter in him. And yet no suspicion of what she was coming to say crossed his mind, and that though Mannyton's death had for an hour filled him with uneasy terrors.

He, too, had scanned the evening papers eagerly that fateful night—but no, there had been nothing, nothing, and he had thrust the fear behind him.

During the last few days he had hardly had any time for thought. Every hour, every moment, was taken up.

He had been touched and surprised by the way all his country neighbours had received the news of his engagement to Miss Pechell. How pleased all his new friends were at his great good fortune! How delightful the fact that his and Mary's betrothal coincided with that of the renewal of Miss Rose's romance!

The one dash to his contentment had been Lady Susan's illness. He had become truly fond of the old lady; and both he and Mary Pechell felt unhappy as well as anxious. Their old friend must be very ill, really ill, not to have written to either the word of congratulation each had expected from her.

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But when he had received Lady Susan's queer, abrupt note he had felt horribly hurt—hurt and angry too. It was ungenerous, as well as ungracious, to bear him malice inasmuch that it was he and not John Ryman who had borne away the prize.

Mary and John Ryman? How preposterous and how absurd such a notion now seemed!

Lady Susan's postscript had given him pause. "Prepare for ill news." What strange sinister words were these?

Was Lady Susan coming to tell him that henceforth they were to be no longer friends? That notion, too, was preposterous! It was not even as if John Ryman were her son. Caryll was well aware that she did not care for her husband's nephew—indeed, when speaking to him in the veiled way she had done of the matter, there had actually been a note of regret in her voice. She had as good as said that the man to whom Mary was engaged—how extraordinary that she should have dared to say Mary was bespoke—was by no means worthy of her!

But when Richard Caryll helped Lady Susan out of her carriage, when he noticed her sad, stern face, framed in the close round widow's bonnet she had never discarded, a deep shadow fell across his heart, and he felt suddenly afraid—afraid as he had felt when John Ryman had pronounced his name at Stane Palace—afraid as when he had opened a paper and seen the death of Gustavus Mannyton. . . .

Lady Susan walked feebly into the big farm kitchen, now so charmingly transformed into a sitting-room, and

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sat down heavily on the first armchair which came to hand.

"I'm a little weak," she said, but her voice was strong, "a little weak from staying in bed."

And then, as he pressed on her some kind of cordial, of restorative, she shook her head impatiently.

"No, I require nothing. I was not really ill. I was only suffering from shock. I had been told a piece of news which greatly pained and surprised me. Are we alone, Mr. Caryll?"

And she looked up, searchingly, pityingly, into his face.

And then in a flash Richard Caryll understood why Lady Susan Baliol had come and thus sought him out. He knew what she was going to say as well as if she had already uttered the words. And he stood up before her, with folded arms, to hear his sentence.

"No fear at all, Lady Susan. We are quite alone. And we shall not be interrupted."

"No doubt the death of Gustavus Mannyton, the late managing director of the Grand Junction Railway, will have prepared you in a measure for what I have come to say?"

Lady Susan looked at him fixedly. She spoke in a clear, hard voice, and she waited for no answer.

"So far, only two people in addition to myself have had access to the papers Mannyton left. But if they are put before the Board, Mr. Caryll, together with proof it would be easy to furnish of your identity, then you know—there is no need for me to tell you—what might happen."

And Caryll said very quietly, "Yes, I quite understand." He waited, and then he asked, "What is it you

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wish me to do?" and it seemed to the old woman sitting there that his eyes had become in the last few moments full of a pleading and terrible questioning.

She got up, unable to bear that burdened, anguished gaze.

"I do not think there is any need for me to tell you," she said, but all the hardness had gone out of her voice, "what it is that you ought to do."

"Listen!" he cried. He wished to forget—he desired to force her, too, to forget for a moment—Mary Pechell. "Listen, Lady Susan! I do not wish to justify myself—but one thing let me tell you. I have made in a measure restitution. If you know the circumstances you will believe me when I tell you that I only took with me a thousand pounds. As to the rest of the money, that which I foolishly lost in speculation, and the trifling sum which assured my mother a decent old age—I have made restitution of it all! Not, I admit, as Mannyton would have had me do to the directors, to be used at their discretion; but, as he must have known perfectly well—for Mannyton was no fool—by large anonymous gifts to the various charities he had so wisely set on foot in connexion with the railway. If I had not done that, I could have come back to England twelve years ago. I don't tell you this to justify myself——" he hesitated, then muttered, "Well, perhaps I do!"

"I did not know what you have just told me," she said slowly. "But though I have no doubt that, as you say, Mannyton knew, I fear the fact would not affect at all the man who now has you at his mercy."

She looked at him fixedly.

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"Your nephew has sent you to tell me that I must go away—leave England?"

"Yes," she said heavily. "He has sent me to say just that. I have come here to-day to tell you that no other course is open to you."

Richard Caryll turned and walked to the end of the long, low room, and then he came back and again stood before her. His face from being pale had turned a deep red.

"You will be quite secure from further molestation," she said steadily. "I am sure that within reason you can make terms."

"Terms?" he echoed, and for the first time there crept a note of astonishment into his voice. "What terms do you mean, Lady Susan?"

"As to absolute secrecy being observed," she said slowly, "as to the evidence which still exists against you being destroyed."

"Can I be sure that secrecy will be observed with regard to the only person in the world who matters to me?"

His voice broke, and then there swept over Lady Susan's dry old heart a great flood of compassion. For she could not answer for John Ryman on that one matter.

"Come here," she said; "come nearer to me, my poor friend. I take it you are a brave man. There are certain things a brave man does not do——"

He nodded. "I know what you mean. But you need not be afraid, Lady Susan. If I make up my mind to go away, I shall go away—alive."

"You will have to go away," she said quietly. "*No* other course—believe me, I speak the truth, Mr. Caryll—is open to you. John Ryman is quite ruthless. And in

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this matter, as you must of course know, he has special reasons——"

Caryll tried to stop her with a sudden gesture. But she went steadily on:

"There is one thing which I, as your friend, think you should do—and not only for your own sake. You must write a letter to Mary Pechell. Tell her as much of the truth as you feel you can do—you owe her that, and you must pay your debt. If you will trust me, I promise that she shall receive your letter from my own hands as soon as you are gone."

"You haven't a doubt that if I do what you wish I shall be doing the best I can by her? Answer me truly, Lady Susan."

And very solemnly she answered him, her conscience guided by the innumerable traditions by which we each and all unconsciously guide not so much our own lives as the lives of others.

"I have no doubt at all. She will suffer—and given her nature, doubtless suffer bitterly. But the day will come when she will be grateful that you left her without subjecting her to the ordeal of choice."

"I wonder if you're right?" he said. And then again, "I wonder——?"

And Lady Susan, deep in her heart, wondered too. But it was with great and with inexpressible relief that she saw him go over to the walnut-wood writing-table on which were spread out the final plans for restoring the Castle. Caryll had received them that very morning.

Now he pushed them roughly aside, and one large sheet fell unheeded to the floor.

Then he sat down and began to write. And though he

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took a comparatively short time over his difficult task, to Lady Susan the moments passed very slowly.

At last he folded the paper over, and lighting the red taper on the table he sealed the flap in the way that letters were fastened a hundred years ago.

"I have told here the bare truth," he said, handing it to her, "just that and nothing more."

"And when shall I give it to her?" asked Lady Susan in a low voice. She was slipping what he had given her into the deep front pocket of her skirt.

"To-morrow morning," he said briefly. "I shall leave Highways to-night."

"For where?"

"Ah, that's my own business! No one here will ever see Richard Caryll again, Lady Susan. Make your mind easy on that score! I shall be supposed to have gone away —a jilted, embittered man. And you must do your best to foster that theory. They'll say I was too old for her. And it's true—it's true! But I was not too old to love her —to make her love——" His voice sank.

"I think I must be going home," said Lady Susan.

And Richard Caryll left her for a moment. She heard his now steady, resonant voice: "Lady Susan is ready for her carriage."

And when he had led her ceremoniously out through the old farmhouse door, she grasped his hand in both her own.

"You'll let me hear from you sometimes?" she said. "You know I'm your friend?"

"Still my friend?" he said doubtfully.

She leant out, towards him.

"Always your friend," she said strongly.

"Prove that to-morrow when you give her my letter."

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And then he wrenched his hand away from hers, and, going back into the house, shut the door.

And Lady Susan, lying back, shut her eyes. They were quite dry, for she was not a woman to cry, she never had been; but her heart was full of sharp, unavailing sorrow, aye, and of remorse.

Once more she told herself bitterly that it was cruel—cruel of John Ryman to have put this awful task upon her.

She lived again through every moment of the painful half-hour she had spent in the house which lay behind her.

The interview had gone off both worse and better than she had expected. She had thought that Caryll would show fight. But he had not shown fight. On the other hand, she herself had suffered far more than she expected to suffer. Even now her suffering was by no means over. Had it even begun? She knew herself to be far fonder of Mary Pechell than she was of Richard Caryll. She loved Mary—she loved Mary better than she loved anything in the world, and she was now going to deal Mary a deadly blow.

As the fat horses slipped and trembled, tacking down the steep winding road, Lady Susan heard now and again the rustle of the curious oblong folded paper lying in her skirt pocket. And as she got nearer and nearer home her oppression, her feeling of remorse, of pain, grew so strong as to be almost unbearable.

In vain she reminded herself of the depth, the enormity, of Caryll's past crime. The decent work-a-day, play-a-day world has to be protected from such felonies. If only the innocent could be spared—but alas! the innocent always suffer for the guilty, and with the guilty.

The old butler shook his head very mournfully when he

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came back into his pantry after having helped Lady Susan to walk into the house, and after he had rung, at her request, for her maid.

"She's gone upstairs again," Grant muttered to himself, "and that's a bad sign—a very bad sign. She won't last long now," and he felt very melancholy.

He had been thirty-five years in Lady Susan's service, and the thought of a change was very disturbing. But he had no intention of staying on with Mr. Ryman—even if Mr. Ryman asked him to do so.

The front door bell rang. Grant hesitated a moment. It was the footman's job to answer the door to casual visitors. And then he thought he would go himself. Perhaps the caller was Mr. Caryll—servants always liked Richard Caryll. He had a cheery, pleasant way with him—and then he was so free with his money, a very agreeable trait in a gentleman.

But it was not Richard Caryll who stood on the old flagstones. It was Miss Pechell.

"Grant?" she said eagerly. "May I come in? I hear her ladyship has been out driving, so I suppose she is quite well again?"

But Grant shook his head solemnly. "No, ma'am, I don't think her ladyship is well. Not at all."

"Oh, Grant, I do so want to see her!" There was a note of poignant disappointment, of eager appeal in Miss Pechell's voice.

And Grant hesitated. It was against nature for Lady Susan to see no one—no one, that is, of her own kind. And who could cheer her up as would do this favourite of hers, and such a nice-spoken young lady too, and who was going to become Mrs. Richard Caryll?

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"Will you send up and see, Grant? Say Miss Pechell's love, and that she's very anxious to see her ladyship?"

The old man lowered his voice instinctively. Lady Susan was, if not exactly a stern, then in no wise a soft mistress.

"If I was you, ma'am, I should go up myself, and just knock at her ladyship's door. I'm afraid she'll say no, if *we* ask her."

Mary hesitated. Never in her life had she taken any kind of liberty with Lady Susan Baliol. And though she had stayed at Halkham House many and many a time as a welcome guest, she had never been in her hostess's bedroom.

But now old Grant had become quite eager.

"In your place, ma'am—if I should venture so to advise—I should go up. It isn't right her ladyship shouldn't see nobody!"

And that decided Mary—made up her mind for her.

"Very well, Grant," she said, "I will go up. If Lady Susan says she would rather not see me, then I will come down and let myself out. You needn't stay."

She passed him, and ran up the familiar staircase to the first floor. And there she stood, waiting a moment and gathering up her courage, by the door which terminated the short broad corridor which she knew gave access to Lady Susan's bedchamber.

Lady Susan had taken off her outdoor things, dismissed her maid, and now she was sitting by the fire, trying to make up her mind as to whether she would go downstairs again.

She had said to Grant that she would have her tea in

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bed, but she was not so old but that she could change her mind. And change her mind she did. It would be pleasanter downstairs, and then she would perhaps be able to distract her mind from that which now filled it wholly.

There came a knock at the door, and Lady Susan frowned.

"May I come in, Lady Susan?"

It was a timid, a pleading voice which spoke, but it gave the hearer a painful shock. Those words, that request was almost like an answer, not exactly to prayer, but to a secret question which had been baffling, torturing Lady Susan ever since she had left Highways.

"Yes," she called out in a strong voice, "Come in, Mary! I'm not in bed."

And then Mary Pechell opened the door, and running quickly across the large circular room she flung herself, with a passion which the older woman had never seen in her, on her knees.

"Lady Susan!" she cried. "Say that you're not angry with me! I've been waiting—longing for a word from you. I can't help loving Richard—I can't help not loving John. You admitted that you yourself could never have loved John Ryman. Surely you aren't angry with me—surely you understand?"

She spoke very quickly, with a tremor in her voice, and though she tried to smile there was an anxious, almost a wild, look in her eyes.

"Do you care so much for my opinion as that?" asked Lady Susan slowly, the other thought, coldly.

"You know I do."

Mary choked back her tears, and got up from her lowly position at Lady Susan's feet. She went and with swift

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steps made her way to the high bow windows which formed a bay at the farther end of the room. She was horribly hurt—hurt and bewildered.

And Lady Susan sat quite still, staring across at the proud, graceful figure of the younger woman.

Should Mary ever marry John Ryman, this would be Mary's room in days to come.

That thought, nay, that certain knowledge, gave Lady Susan pause.

It was a large and in its way a splendid apartment, this bedchamber in which generations of Baliols had been born and had faded out of life.

Lady Susan's mind travelled back over long years. She saw herself once more a bride—standing in this very room, filled with an almost savage fear and revolt from the husband who loved her, and from the life which lay before her as his wife.

True that with the years there had come to her what had been a good working substitute for the love she had never felt for kind, true, unselfish John Baliol.

But John Ryman was a man of a very different stamp. John Baliol—perhaps the fact had not been wholly to his credit—had known a good deal about women before he fell in love with Lady Susan.

John Ryman was quite unaware that love is one of the arts rather than an exact science, but that would not much matter if Mary Pechell, before becoming a wife had never known what love is—what love can be.

But as, unhappily, she did now know?

Lady Susan got up stiffly from her chair: she drew her short figure to its full height and walked across the wide

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room—and then she lifted up her arm and put a trembling hand on Mary's shoulder.

"My dear," she said, "it's very foolish when two people quarrel who are fond of one another as we are fond. My silence has not been owing to the reason which you think. It has been owing to quite another reason—and a much more serious reason, Mary. You say you love me, child—well, I am going to prove to you now that I love you as well as—nay, better than you, my dear, can ever love me."

She fumbled for a moment with her skirt, and then she drew Richard Caryll's letter out of the pocket.

"I was told to give you this to-morrow morning," she said solemnly. "But, Mary, I take a great risk, and give it you now. I have just come from Highways——"

"From Highways?"

"Yes, my dear, from Highways. And as a result of my going there Richard Caryll wrote this letter—the letter I was to give you to-morrow——"

And then Lady Susan began trembling, really trembling. For a moment she feared she was going to faint.

The enormity, the irrevocability of the act which she had just committed had suddenly become present to her. There came over her a wild impulse to try and retrieve the letter of which Mary was now breaking the seal.

But she resisted the impulse.

"Read it," she said solemnly. "And may God forgive me if I have done wrong in giving it to you! But Mary? Don't be in a hurry to act on it. There are hours before you in which you can make up your mind. And remember that whatever way you decide I shall be satisfied. I want

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you to feel, my dear, as if I were your mother—as if you could trust me, secure that I shall understand."

But Mary Pechell made no answer to these solemnly uttered words. She was gazing down at the piece of paper she held in her hand—reading, over and over again, the piteous confession Caryll had written, trying to master its full significance.

And then Lady Susan saw her do a curious thing—Mary went quickly over to the wood fire; she stooped and holding her lover's letter to the flickering flame watched it burn.

When it was utterly consumed, when only the thin blue and purple flames were there, she came back to where Lady Susan stood watching her, and then, suddenly, she folded the short figure in her arms.

"Good-bye," she whispered. "No woman was ever more good to her child than you have been to me to-day, and I shall never, never leave off being grateful to you!"

"Then you mean to go with him?" asked Lady Susan.

She had stood quite passive in Mary Pechell's arms. Now that the die was cast, her usual tart serenity returned. She felt her old strength come back. She was as well as she had been before John Ryman's ill-timed visit.

"I am going to Highways—now at once."

"You can't go alone, my dear."

"Oh yes, I can." Mary spoke defiantly.

"No, indeed, that you cannot do! All you may do is to write to him. I too will send him a note inviting him to spend the night here. Then to-morrow, if you are still of the same mind, I will go up to London with you both, and I will stay there till you are married."

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"Oh, Lady Susan—how good you are to me!"

"Not as good as I should have liked to have been, Mary."

"Yes, yes—far more good!"

"You could not find it in your heart to see, to make a personal appeal, to John Ryman?"

"No," said Mary decidedly. "I would rather die."

And so the people of Halkham enjoyed yet another and by far the greatest of the sensations a kind Providence had vouchsafed to them that autumn.

This was the sudden marriage, by special licence, of Richard Caryll and Mary Pechell, followed by the happy pair's departure for a colony where the one time owner of Highways had large business interests.

It further became known that instead of restoring the Castle, Mr. Caryll, in honour of his marriage, had decided to present the county with the famous ruins, as well as the hill of which they formed the apex.

And this was quite as it should be. No woman in her senses, the village thought, would have consented to make her home in such a wild and dreary spot as Highways.

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